

The Anti-Father and His Silent Sons: Disability, Healing, and Critique in the Acts of John*

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■ Abstract

This article analyzes the second-century Acts of John 56–57, in which Antipatros seeks healing for his twin sons whom he claims he cannot support as he ages. I argue that this passage turns on a layered critique of Antipatros. First, the text censures medical commerce. Second, it uses his threat of murder, economic circumstances, and name to undermine Antipatros as both father and inquiring disciple. The episode thus leverages criticism of a character whose negative attitudes lead him to contemplate destruction of those with infirmities. However, it retains a mixed message: while the *character* of the apostle John comes to focus on the sons, the *narrative* silences them. Ultimately, the text emphasizes what the critique means for the flawed male, elite father, rather than the experience of the impaired sons. Such dynamics warrant close attention as we continue to expand our understanding of attitudes to disability in sources from antiquity.

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■ Keywords

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■ Introduction

A swathe of recent studies has highlighted the complexity of attitudes toward, and the historical experience of, disability in antiquity. Deploying lenses from contemporary disability theory, numerous important works have critiqued portraits of sensory and physical impairments in early Jewish and Christian literature and problematized healing narratives.¹ Others demonstrate how postmortem ideals communicate attitudes to bodily infirmities and perfection.² Elsewhere, archaeologists have debunked earlier assumptions, such as that those with lifelong impairments would simply not have been raised from infancy or would have been incapable of economic participation in adulthood.³ Increasingly, the picture emerging from this research is of mixed attitudes to impairment across antiquity's diverse literature, geography, and communities.

This article illuminates further elements of this complexity with a case study: a healing story with a twist in expectations. My focus is a narrative encounter in which a character named Antipatros asks the apostle John to heal his twin sons, in a Greek fragment identified as the second-century Acts of John 56–57.⁴ This

¹ See, for instance, Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, introduction to *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; SemeiaSt 55; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007) 1–9; *Disability Studies and Biblical Studies* (ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper; New York: Palgrave, 2011); Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (LHBOTS 445; New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Biblical Refigurations; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Louise J. Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Biblical Refigurations; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (ECL 23; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018); Louise A. Gosbell, "The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame": *Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament* (WUNT 2/469; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018); Susan V. Betcher, "Disability and the Terror of the Miracle Tradition," in *Miracles Revisited: New Testament Miracle Stories and Their Concepts of Reality* (ed. Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder; Studies in the Bible and Its Reception 2; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013) 161–81.

² Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Meghan Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

³ Debby Sneed, "Disability and Infanticide in Ancient Greece," *Hesperia* 90 (2021) 747–72; Emma-Jayne Graham, "Disparate Lives or Disparate Deaths? Post-Mortem Treatment of the Body and the Articulation of Difference," in *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies: "A Capite ad Calcem"* (ed. Christian Laes, C. F. Goodey, and M. Lynn Rose; Mnemosyne Supp, History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity 356; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 249–74.

⁴ E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis* (2 vols.; Corpus Christianorum: Series Apocryphorum;

passage, I suggest, turns on the criticism of a character with negative attitudes to his impaired sons. However, demonstrating the continued importance of intersectional factors, the text nonetheless remains focused on what this means for the flawed male, elite character of the father, with whom the audience is likely to identify, rather than the experience of the sons.

In the following discussion, after outlining the episode, I suggest that the narrative makes a two-layered critique that subverts expectations about the situation of the healed characters. First, it censures medical commerce, in a form familiar from other texts. Second, it exploits a series of ambiguities and negative characterizations found also in other literature to critique Antipatros himself and the request for his sons' healing that he makes of John. I argue that the passage's focus rests on this critique and, as the narrative undermines Antipatros for his attitude toward, and proposed strategies to address, his sons' impairments, it indicates a nuanced approach to disability. While the sons are in some senses doubly endangered, John's help is required to save the sons' lives not primarily from their illness but from their father. And yet, other narrative features retain a mixed message. While the *character* of the apostle John ultimately comes to focus on the sons, the *narrative* itself silences the sons from any speaking part. This mixed message brings to life the complexity of portraits of disability in antiquity: even passages that embed critique of negative responses to impairment can remain focused on the characters thereby criticized rather than giving voice to the experience of characters with impairments. Such dynamics warrant close attention as we continue to fill out the picture of attitudes to disability in antiquity.

■ Antipatros, His Sons, and John

The fragment begins by narrating the apostle's departure from Ephesus and arrival at Smyrna, at which point a large crowd gathers. Having heard that John is a miracle worker, Antipatros, a member of the Smyrna elite, approaches John with a proposition. He offers ten thousand⁵ pieces of gold and then describes the condition of his sons:

Turnhout: Brepols, 1983) 1:75, 92–96. There is a lacuna in the Acts of John, evident due to geographical references. Various fragments have been suggested to fill the gap. Junod and Kaestli place the passage about Antipatros and his sons at 56–57, making sense of travel details about the departure from Ephesus and arrival in Smyrna. See Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:25, 92–107; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 304, 327. Hans-Josef Klauck dates the Acts of John to 150–160 CE (*The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction* [trans. Brian McNeil; Waco: Baylor, 2008] 18). Provenance is less clear, with tentative suggestions of Egypt (Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2:689–94; Jan Bremmer, “Women in the Apocryphal Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of John* [Kampen: Pharos, 1995] 37–56, at 54–56; Elliott, *The Apocryphal*, 306), Syria, and Smyrna (see Klauck, *The Apocryphal*, 18).

⁵ Elliott translates as “one hundred thousand” (μυριάδας δέκα; Elliott, *The Apocryphal*, 327).

I have twin sons who since birth have been possessed of a demon and who have suffered terribly: they are thirty-four years old. In one moment both may fall faint, sometimes in the baths, sometimes while walking, often while eating, and sometimes even at a public gathering in town. You will see for yourself that they are well-built men, but they are overcome by this malady that possesses them every day. (56.6–14)⁶

Having set out the typical manifestations of his sons' condition, Antipatros exhorts John for their healing; it is a request for assistance in his advanced age. There is a short interaction between John and Antipatros, in the presence of the sons. John dismisses the offer of money and requests instead that Antipatros give his soul in exchange. Ignoring John's comments, Antipatros renews his request, noting the indiscriminate approach John has taken in healing all until now as a precedent for the request that John not neglect his sons. Having already alluded to his readiness to "take a deadly decision" (56.14–15),⁷ Antipatros finally discloses that he has plans to take his sons' lives: "With the agreement of my kinsfolk I was prepared to kill them with poison on account of the derision,⁸ but you who have come as a faithful doctor invested by God, for their sake, enlighten them and help them" (56.24–27).⁹ Once this plan is revealed, John moves immediately into a prayer and then a successful exorcism and healing, which leads to a baptism and dismissal as the episode closes.

In the manner of ancient fiction (commonly noted as important background for the Apocryphal Acts, though the genre is subverted in many ways), it seems that everything ends on a happy note.¹⁰ John has acquiesced to Antipatros's request,

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, throughout I use Elliott's translation for the English.

⁷ Note the difficult text here: σκέπτομαι γὰρ λογιζόμενον τινα εἰνατῶ ἐπάγειν. The ET given above is Elliott's, consistent with the French given by Junod and Kaestli: "Je m'apprête en effet à prendre une résolution funeste" (although they also acknowledge an alternative, which they do not favor, would be possible: "Je cherche à me faire entendre raison"; see Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:240 n. 3).

⁸ I have adjusted Elliott's translation ("to end the derision and poison them") to reflect the more direct wording of the Greek: φαρμάκῳ αὐτοῦς ἀνελεῖν διὰ τὸ κατάγελως. This is in keeping with the translations by Junod and Kaestli (*Acta Iohannis*) and *NTAporc* (ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; trans. Robert McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; Cambridge: Clarke; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁹ Junod and Kaestli identify several textual difficulties here. They offer: πάντων γὰρ τῶν συγγενῶν μου <συγγνόντων> σκέπτομαι φαρμάκῳ αὐτοῦς ἀνελεῖν διὰ τὸ κατάγελως. Although most of the difficulties are minor differences between manuscripts, they add συγγνόντων to complete the genitive absolute. They note ambiguity about whether the plan was decided with agreement of the wider family or at their initiative, or (less likely) against their will, though they observe the key issue is Antipatros's rationalization of it: "Que ce soit 'avec l'assentiment' ou 'à l'instigation' ou même à la rigueur 'contre la volonté' des membres de la famille, Antipatros révèle ici à l'apôtre la nature de sa 'résolution funeste' à laquelle il a fait allusion plus haut. Cette résolution consiste donc en un projet d'euthanasie qui aura aussi pour effet de mettre fin à la moquerie générale" (Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:240–41 n. 6).

¹⁰ Janet E. Spittler describes the "emotional rollercoaster" that is "typical of ancient novels and cognate literature like the apocryphal acts" ("Joking and Play in the Acts of John," in *Delightful Acts: New Essays on Canonical and Non-Canonical Acts* [ed. Harold W. Attridge, Dennis R. MacDonald,

healed an illness that was a source of much derision, and righted an economic hardship for an aging man who would struggle to support well-built male adult children once he also became too frail to work. But I suggest there is more going on in this text: Antipatros is himself the focus of an important critique as the narrative unfolds.

■ A Critique of Medical Commerce

The first layer of critique in the text lies in Antipatros's expectations of John as an entrepreneurial medical practitioner charging extortionate fees.¹¹ The description of the sons' infirmity (56.6–14), as cited above, is set out in the terms in which the "falling sickness" was known; in some sources this condition is described (given its attribution to spiritual causes) as "the sacred disease."¹² Earlier scholarship suggested this condition was epilepsy.¹³ Though recent scholarship rightly demonstrates concerns about attributing modern diagnoses to ancient texts,¹⁴ it is also worth noting that there was an ancient terminology for epilepsy (ἐπιληπτικός; cf., e.g., Plut. *Lyc.* 16.2). In a Greek treatise dated to the fifth century BCE and included in the Hippocratic corpus, *The Sacred Disease*, the anonymous author discusses the illness's etiology while countering opposing practitioners who he says erroneously identify spiritual causes of the illness (*Morb. sacr.* 1.1–16).

and Clare K. Rothschild; WUNT 391; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017] 209–25, at 224). While exhibiting features of ancient novels (see S. M. Praeder, "Luke-Acts and the Ancient Novel," in SBLSP 1981 [ed. K. H. Richards; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981] 269–92; Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* [London: Routledge, 1995] esp. 124–41), Apocryphal Acts subvert these, e.g., turning romances to celibacy (Acts of Peter; Acts of Thomas 11–16).

¹¹ On the possible benefits of presenting itinerant preachers in line with expectations of physicians, see Giovanni Battista Bazzana, "Early Christian Missionaries as Physicians: Healing and Its Cultural Value in the Greco-Roman Context," *NovT* 51 (2009) 232–51. As discussed further below, stereotypical criticisms about exploitative medical workers do not preclude historical realities in which self-authorized medical work was valued and common. See Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Julie Laskaris warns against anachronistically dismissing some ancient views as "superstitious," noting the complexity of the anonymous treatise *The Sacred Disease* as polemic against rivals in a competitive setting (*The Art Is Long: On the Sacred Disease and the Scientific Traditions* [Studies in Ancient Medicine 25; Leiden: Brill, 2018] 1–5). On etiologies, see Nadine Metzger, "Not a *Daimōn*, but a Severe Illness": Oribasius, Posidonius and Later Ancient Perspectives on Superhuman Agents Causing Disease," in *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine: From Celsus to Paul of Aegina* (ed. Chiara Thumiger and P. N. Singer; Studies in Ancient Medicine 50; Leiden: Brill, 2018) 79–106, at 85.

¹³ Oswei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology* (rev. 2nd ed; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994). The symptoms are suggestive, but retrospective diagnosis fraught: *The Sacred Disease* describes symptoms: "the patient becomes speechless and chokes; froth flows from the mouth; he gnashes his teeth and twists his hands; the eyes roll and intelligence fails, and in some cases excrement is discharged" (10.1–6).

¹⁴ See Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper, introduction, 2–3; Lutz Alexander Graumann, "Monstrous Births and Retrospective Diagnosis: The Case of Hermaphrodites in Antiquity," in *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity* (ed. Laes, Goody, and Rose) 181–209.

The treatise goes on to discuss the illness's effect on patients of different ages, delineating various presentations (and thus prognoses) and suggesting that those who had experienced the symptoms since birth and beyond puberty, as in the case of Antipatros's sons, were unlikely to improve (*Morb. sacr.* 11–15).¹⁵ Indeed, Antipatros describes an escalation of his sons' symptoms, claiming that their childhood experience of the disease was difficult but that they suffer terribly now as adults because “their demons have grown up too” (Acts of John 56.16–17). This likewise mimics the language of *The Sacred Disease*, where the author discusses the generally irreversible trajectory of the illness when it has “grown and been nourished with the body” since infancy (*Morb. sacr.* 14.1–2).

Antipatros's description of his sons' condition reveals an effect on life and social consequences that we might describe in the language of disability. Contemporary disability theories offer a variety of ways of conceiving of the relationship between an impairment or infirmity (a description of a person's physiology, morphology, and so on), and “disability” (a context-dependent social construction).¹⁶ But the key distinction to note is that disability indicates an additional attribution about a feature of a person that attracts stigma or special attention and is considered “disabling” in a given context. Although disability is often taken to be a contemporary construct, there are signs of an awareness of a similar category in ancient sources, as Rebecca Raphael convincingly argues of the frequent collocation of the “blind,” “deaf,” and “lame.”¹⁷ Varied ancient texts confirm that stigma about the sacred disease was commonplace. *The Sacred Disease* 15.1–14 observes that adults hide away when they feel an episode coming on, being more experienced at reading the signs than

¹⁵ On the sacred disease in children, see Cornelia Horn, “Approaches to the Study of Sick Children and Their Healing: Christian Apocryphal Acts, Gospels, and Cognate Literatures,” in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity* (ed. Cornelia Horn and Robert R. Phenix; Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 58; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 171–97, at 181. See also Temkin, *Falling Sick*, 46.

¹⁶ While this distinction reflects a crucial critique of the medical model, various models have since developed to nuance resulting difficulties. Literary theorist Lennard Davis challenged the rigid distinction between impairment and disability in the social model (*Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* [Cultural Front; New York: New York University Press, 2002] 23; *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* [London: Verso, 1995] 2–4, 11–15). Biblical scholar Jeremy Schipper, building also on Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson, used such insights to argue for a cultural model that views these as a spectrum (*Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* [LHBOTS 441; New York: T&T Clark, 2006] 18–20; cf. Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson, “The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?,” in *Exploring Theories and Expanding Methodologies: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go* [ed. Sharon N. Barnartt and Barbara M. Altman; Research in Social Science and Disability 2; Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001] 9–28). Raphael likewise offers a nuanced response to Davis (Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 6–13). For helpful overviews of diverse models, see Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, “Disability Studies and the Bible,” in *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications* (ed. Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013) 21–37, at 21–25; Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 4–5; and Solevåg, *Negotiating*, 4–9.

¹⁷ Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 13–15.

children.¹⁸ From this perspective, it is interesting that seizures in public gatherings are listed in Antipatros's climatic final example of his sons' symptoms (Acts of John 56.11–12). The whole description makes the reader aware that the sons suffer a terrible disease that brings daily shame upon the family.¹⁹ It is clearly disabling in Antipatros's account. And it is lifelong.

Ancient treatments for the falling sickness are varied, reflecting differing explanations of etiology. Anna Rebecca Solevåg delineates two broad frameworks through which the illness's causes were understood in the ancient world: invasion (a spirit takes internal command of the sufferer) and imbalance (symptoms arise through a systemic imbalance within the sufferer).²⁰ Treatments might include changes to diet and lifestyle, or pharmacological therapies.²¹ In keeping with the view that illness beginning in childhood and extending to adulthood makes recovery unlikely, as described above (cf. *Morb. sacr.* 11–14), ancient sources demonstrate general pessimism about the efficacy of treatment.

Such skepticism likewise reflects common ethical criticisms of certain medical practices. For the author of *The Sacred Disease*, other physicians' misunderstandings of the causes of the illness are shown in a range of inappropriate remedies they prescribe, through which they may avoid any responsibility for the outcome. He claims: "These observances they impose because of the divine origin of the disease, claiming superior knowledge and alleging other causes, so that, should the patient recover, the reputation for cleverness may be theirs; but should the patient die, they may have a sure fund of excuses, with the defence that they are not at all to blame, but the gods" (*Morb. sacr.* 2.29–33).²²

Moreover, the considerable expense associated with any treatment was considered open to exploitation (a common strand of criticism that no doubt also reflects the interests and biases of those who wished to criticize other "freelance" medical practitioners).²³ In his treatise *That the Best Physician Is Also a Philosopher*, Galen criticizes "practitioners who are no physicians, but poisoners . . . lovers of money who abuse the Art for ends that are opposed to its nature."²⁴ Guilia Ecce notes that "the charge of greed (φιλαργυρία), which reduces the goal of the medical practice to the physician's μισθός, is typically attributed to physicians from the classical

¹⁸ See further discussion in Temkin, *Falling Sickness*, 66, 90.

¹⁹ On the family context of childhood infirmity, see Horn, "Approaches," 192–94; Christian Laes, "Raising a Disabled Child," in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (ed. Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 129–31.

²⁰ Solevåg, *Negotiating*, 98–100; Laskaris, *The Art*, 5.

²¹ Other options also developed over time, including surgical approaches. See Temkin's attempt at an encyclopedic overview in *Falling Sickness*, 78–81.

²² Hippocrates, *Morb. Sacr.* (Jones, LCL; translation adapted).

²³ This point is well made by Wendt, *Temple Gates*, 1–9.

²⁴ Translation: P. Brain, "Galen on the Ideal of the Physician," *South African Medical Journal* 52 (1977) 936–38.

era onwards.²⁵ And she discusses ancient writers who attempt to distinguish the proper practice of medicine from the behavior of those deserving of such a charge.

Antipatros's opening gambit with the huge financial offer is a targeted criticism of those whose medical assistance would require this kind of capital, while also possibly flagging Antipatros's desperation.²⁶ This dynamic is familiar from references in the canonical gospels, such as in the description of the woman with the flow of blood who has been made destitute by the charges of unscrupulous doctors (Mark 5:26). Just as Jesus heals the woman without payment, John's first words to Antipatros in response are: "My healer" (he emphasizes that he is not the healer himself) "works without payment, and heals freely" (Acts of John 56.18). This is a common theme among ancient sources. In the pseudonymous "Hippocratic" *Letter 11*, Hippocrates likewise refuses payment and argues for the free practice of medicine.²⁷

But in the Acts of John, as the passage continues, John's speech shows that there *is* an expectation of some kind of trade: "in exchange for illness he accepts the souls cured. What are you prepared to give, Antipatros, in exchange for your sons? Give your soul to God and you will find your sons in good health by the power of Christ" (56.19–22).

The narrative certainly critiques expensive and possibly exploitative medical practices. The amount of gold discussed is hyperbolic; the kind of exaggeration we might expect of texts in this genre.²⁸ The reader is able to see that this is a preposterous price. John's proposed exchange is, however, also complex.²⁹ Are the sons—or, more precisely, removal of the additional burden that Antipatros claims they place on him as he ages—simply a bargaining chip in winning Antipatros to Christ?

Through their concept of "narrative prosthesis," David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have offered an important framework for making sense of some uses of characters with disabilities.³⁰ They observe that narratives frequently rely on characters with disabilities, so that it is not that such characters are absent from literary sources (as we might find with some other marginalized identities in

²⁵ Giulia Eccà, "The Μισθόριον in the *Praecepta*: The Medical Fee and Its Impact on the Patient," in *Homo Patiens: Approaches to the Patient in the Ancient World* (ed. Georgia Petridou and Chiara Thumiger; Studies in Ancient Medicine 45; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 325–44, at 329.

²⁶ Klauck claims the financial offer and exhortation to divestment are "doubtless meant as a polemic against money-hungry doctors and expensive cults of healing" (*The Apocryphal*, 25).

²⁷ See further discussion in Eccà, "The Μισθόριον," 329 n. 14.

²⁸ For typical features of ancient novels, see Praeder, "Luke-Acts and the Ancient Novel," 269–92.

²⁹ I have not found any other examples of an ancient healer requesting an exchange of a soul for healing.

³⁰ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Corporalities: Discourses of Disability; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 40–50. For biblical studies that profitably apply Mitchell and Snyder's concept of "narrative prosthesis," see, for instance, Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*; Solevåg, *Negotiating*, 29–52; Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 32–39.

antique and modern sources), but rather they are both “pervasive” and employed in a “hypersymbolic” way. Mitchell and Snyder’s concept explains superficial use of characters who are not given full personalities, agencies, or backstories, but whose presence in the narrative is simply to support another narrative purpose, which in turn relies on a negative representation of disability in the broader social context. Here, the archetypal example might be a villain who is portrayed with a physical or sensory impairment—Peter Pan’s Captain Hook with his missing limb, or the frequent trope of facial disfigurements in villains in James Bond films. Negative attitudes toward the disability or disfigurement support the negative characterization.³¹ As discussed further below, by keeping the sons silent, the Acts of John’s treatment of Antipatros’s sons retains a mixed message. Nonetheless, as the narrative focuses on Antipatros, the sons’ disability forms an integral part of the text’s critique of him. Unlike the features Mitchell and Snyder identify in narrative prosthesis, where a passage relies on negative representations of disability, however, here the text *critiques* the negative response to the sons’ disability, with Antipatros himself coming under further layers of marked criticism.

■ Antipatros: Concerned Father or Villain?

The narrative does more than reframe Antipatros’s understanding of appropriate medical assistance. I suggest it undermines Antipatros and his whole approach to his sons’ impairments. In what follows I argue that the narrative communicates this critique through his threat to take his sons’ lives, his financial position, and his name, as well as by the structure of the dialogue and its ambiguous ending.

A. Attitudes to Infanticide and Filicide

Antipatros’s plot to take his sons’ lives is central to his negative characterization. Rather than making him a sympathetic character, it constructs him with traits that various ancient texts, including early Christian sources, attribute to negative or more primitive “others,” in contrast to the groups with which the writer identifies. This warrants a brief survey of the ways in which such texts present fathers taking the lives of their children.

1. A father’s right to take the life of an adult son: There is a frequent assumption among discussions of Roman family structures that the *patria potestas* included within it a particular “right over life and death” (*ius vitae ac necis*), whereby the *paterfamilias* had a legislated right to determine whether the offspring over whom he held legal fatherhood would live or die.³² In fact, this concept is dubious. In a

³¹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 99–100.

³² For influential works, see A. Watson, *The Law of Persons in the Later Roman Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 77–101; William V. Harris, “The Roman Father’s Power of Life and Death,” in *Studies in Roman Law in Memory of A. Arthur Schiller* (ed. Roger S. Bagnall and William V. Harris; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 81–95. Yifat Monnickendam notes the debate and questions about practice but still argues the right existed (“The Exposed Child: Transplanting Roman Law into Late Antique

thorough study of the legal and economic details of the *patria potestas*, Antti Arjava notes that the so-called right over life and death “seems always to have been mainly symbolic, and in Late Antiquity it was clearly considered obsolete,”³³ while Brent D. Shaw and Richard P. Saller each seek to offer a detailed survey of any relevant evidence of the “right” and conclude that it never existed.³⁴

There are some texts in which taking a son’s life is presented positively. These are not legal texts, but exempla, recorded by writers like Sallust and Livy in their first-century BCE Latin histories, or Valerius Maximus in his first-century CE Latin collection of exempla. Here, the presenting issue is one of disciplining delinquent or felonious sons; the exempla play on a tension between a father’s duty to the empire, frequently arising from a formal office such as senator or consul, and his paternal instincts. In a famous example, Brutus arrests, flogs, and beheads his sons because they tried to reinstate Tarquin against Brutus’s efforts. In the words of Valerius Maximus: “he put off the father to play the Consul, and preferred to live childless rather than fail to support public retribution” (5.8.1; cf. Livy 2.2–5). Similarly, writing about the Catiline conspiracy, Sallust describes “Fulvius, a senator’s son, who was brought back from his journey and put to death by order of his father” (Sall. *Cat.* 39.5; cf. V.M. 5.8.5). But, as Shaw asserts, the actions of such a father are praised not for exercising a right as a *paterfamilias*, but because he follows through with the obligations of his office *despite* a presumed paternal affection that might have predisposed him to mercy.³⁵ In other examples from rhetorical schools, in which historical cases mix with fictionalization, characters in dialogues assert a father’s right to take his son’s life. Seneca the Elder’s first-century CE Latin *Controversies* describes a certain Gallio, who “felt that the difference between a grandfather and a father was that the former could reprimand or discipline a grandson in order to protect him, whereas the father could kill his son” (Sen. *Controv.* 9.5.7). However, as the ensuing discussion addresses this topos

Jewish and Christian Legal Discourse,” *American Journal of Legal History* 59 [2019] 1–30, at 4–7).

³³ Antti Arjava, “Paternal Power in Late Antiquity,” *JRS* 88 (1998) 147–165, at 153. See also Jane F. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), which details practical issues on economics and inheritance.

³⁴ Brett D. Shaw, “Raising and Killing Children: Two Roman Myths,” *Mnemosyne* 4/54 (2001) 31–77; Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 102–32. See also Darrel W. Amundsen, who notes there was no law against killing a “defective newborn,” though also no legal permission for it (“Medicine and the Birth of Defective Children: Approaches of the Ancient World,” in *Euthanasia and the Newborn: Conflicts Regarding Saving Lives* [ed. Richard C. Mcmillan, H. Tristram Engelhardt, and Stuart F. Spicker; Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987] 3–22, at 8). Anton van Hooff helpfully notes a 2nd-cent. CE trial of a father accused of murdering his son (*From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-killing in Classical Antiquity* [London: Routledge, 1990] 171).

³⁵ Shaw argues such stories “functioned as stereotypical exempla of the father demonstrating his higher *pietas* to the state” (“Raising,” 60 n. 77). Contra John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 59 n. 11.

for a debate, it results not in the affirmation of a legal right over life and death but in refuting Gallio's claim.

Thus, not only are the examples of fathers taking adult sons' lives embedded in texts about the dilemmas arising from a clash of political office and paternal feeling,³⁶ but even where a general right is considered (and refuted), the texts that explore the murder of adult children do not relate such a choice to infirmity. It seems that second-century readers of the Antipatros episode are unlikely to see here a reference to a father's right to take the life of adult children.

2. Infanticide in Greek and Roman texts: A right over life and death is often also cited as legal backing for practices of infanticide and exposure. The 1980s and 1990s saw a particular interest in publications on these practices in antiquity, with discussion of both legal and literary sources leading to a variety of claims about the prevalence of, and attitudes toward, fathers (or midwives, mothers, or enslavers) causing the death of unwanted infants.³⁷ This important scholarship also suggested evidence of selective infanticide/exposure practices, identifying groups at particular risk: female infants, children conceived through infidelity, pregnancies reaching term after divorce or the death of the father, the children of slaves, and—most relevant to the story of Antipatros's children—infants believed to display evidence of an infirmity or disfigurement.³⁸ In the latter case, references to infanticide have frequently been interpreted as reflecting a general attitude that children with disabilities were deemed “not worth rearing.”³⁹

³⁶ Some texts suggest the possibility of self-killing for loyalty (for instance, stories of Selene [Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 3.57.5] and Erigone [Hyginus, *Fabulae* 243]), though voices critical of suicide extend from at least the time of Plato onward (e.g., Seneca the Elder, *Controv.* 8.4; Quintilian, *Inst.* 7.3.7; *Clementine Homilies* 12 [12.1–24.5]; see Miriam Griffin, “Ancient Attitudes to Suicide,” review of Anton J. L. Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*, *Classical Review* 42 [1992] 130–32, at 132). While the listening sons themselves could be included among the “kin” consulted in preparing this plan, both the broader attitude to suicide displayed across the Acts of John (28–29, 48–54) and the active terms that attribute responsibility to Antipatros (56.15, 25–26), undermine this explanation.

³⁷ A key preoccupation was the question of how such practices relate to (dis)continuities in how parents love their children. See Emiel Eyben, “Family Planning in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *Ancient Society* 11/12 (1980/1981) 5–82, at 81; Candida R. Moss, “Infant Exposure and the Rhetoric of Cannibalism, Incest, and Martyrdom in the Early Church,” *J ECS* 29 (2021) 341–69, at 343 n. 5.

³⁸ Robert Garland identifies four categories: female, deformed or sickly, children conceived out of wedlock, and children of slaves (*The Greek Way of Life: From Conception to Old Age* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990] 86). Ville Vuolanto also notes legal discussion about infanticide or exposure of children whose fathers had died or divorced between conception and birth (“Infant Abandonment and the Christianization of Medieval Europe,” in *The Darksides of Childhood in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Unwanted, Disabled, and Lost* [ed. Katariina Mustakallio and Christian Laes; Childhood in the Past Monograph Series 2; Oxford: Oxbow, 2011] 3–19, at 10–11). Such claims about particular groups need also to be read alongside discussion of infanticide or abandonment of children from wealthy parents due to inheritance concerns in large families (Moss, “Infant Exposure,” 357).

³⁹ This phrase is deployed from Soranus, *Gyn.* 2.10. See criticism of this scholarly assumption in Sneed, “Disability and Infanticide,” 747–72. Cf. also Laes, “Raising,” 129–31.

Despite the importance of this work, recent studies are more cautious in their conclusions, recognizing the scant sources before the fourth through sixth centuries CE that address legal and historical questions directly and the importance of contextualizing references in literary sources.⁴⁰ That there is evidence for the *practice* of exposing unwanted newborns is not disputed.⁴¹ For instance, in an oft-cited letter found at Oxyrhynchus, a man exhorts his wife to expose a newborn if female: “I beg and entreat you, take care of the little one, and as soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out” (P. Oxy. 4.744.6–10).⁴² How to determine the practice’s prevalence or emphases is more contested. In the case of this documentary evidence from Oxyrhynchus, though often cited as indicative of a general attitude, it is worth noting that this is a single example.⁴³ The content does parallel a joke in third-century BCE New Comedy,⁴⁴ which might indicate a wider awareness of historical selective exposure of females and/or disdain for the idea of such a practice.

Indeed, as far as they can be gleaned, the *attitudes* promoted in sources, particularly those that seem to present normative views, are most helpful in considering a reader’s expected response to Antipatros’s stated intention of killing his impaired sons. Similarly, it is important to separate material on practices of “abandonment,” which Ville Vuolanto argues were intended to *spare* the child as a foundling, from actions explicitly intended to take the child’s life.⁴⁵ With this in mind, the following briefly considers attitudes to infanticide in legal material, philosophical accounts of the state, and ethnographic treatments of other groups.

Legal support for infanticide in Greek and Roman antiquity is partial at best. Cicero includes a statement that attributes infanticide of offspring with deformities

⁴⁰ Vuolanto articulates this newer caution well (“Infant Abandonment,” 14). Some material evidence has been used to support opposing arguments, such as an overrepresentation of female children among cemetery remains (evidence of selective infanticide, or of a higher survival rate until death by other causes?). See Eleanor Scott, “Unpicking a Myth: The Infanticide of Female and Disabled Infants in Antiquity,” *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* (2000) 143–51. On natural causes and infant remains, see Maria A. Liston and Susan I. Rotroff, “Babies in the Well: Archeological Evidence for Newborn Disposal in Hellenistic Greece,” in *Oxford Handbook of Childhood* (ed. Grubbs and Parkin), 62–82.

⁴¹ On the difficulties of estimating historical incidence, see Cynthia Patterson, “‘Not Worth the Rearing’: The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974–2014) 115 (1985) 103–23.

⁴² For further discussion of this text, see Elaine Fantham, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 162.

⁴³ See Judith Evans Grubbs, “The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment: Motives, Attitudes and (Unintended) Consequences,” in *Dark Side* (ed. Mustakallio and Laes), 21–36, at 23.

⁴⁴ Posidippus Fr 11. See Erkki Koskenneimi, *The Exposure of Infants among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (SWBA 2/4; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009) 3 n. 13.

⁴⁵ Vuolanto redefines “abandonment” as leaving a child somewhere in the hope that they be found, with sufficient resources to survive until discovery and no link to identify the biological parents (“Infant Abandonment,” 14–15). See also Boswell, *Kindness*. These distinctions highlight the need to separate sources on abandonment from infanticide in considering possible attitudes to Antipatros’s intention to kill his infirm sons.

to the Twelve Tables. Cicero's reference is not presented as a citation of the Twelve Tables specifically but is an illustrative aside that he attributes to Quintus's comments on the powers of tribunes. Quintus claims that, though revived shortly afterwards, the tribune's power had for a period been "quickly killed, as the Twelve Tables direct that terribly deformed infants shall be killed" (*cito necatus tamquam ex duodecim tabulis insignis ad deformitatem puer*).⁴⁶ This is the extent of the extant material about infanticide attributed to the Twelve Tables by authors from antiquity.⁴⁷ Notably, it does not link the infanticide to a specific "right over life and death" based on *patria potestas*.⁴⁸ Other sources explore legal questions arising from fathers wishing to take back children abandoned and then reared by others; though potentially complex in their own way, these do not relate to the legality or otherwise of taking the child's life.⁴⁹

The sentiment Cicero attributes to the Twelve Tables bears a particular resemblance to idealized accounts of the state in Plato and Aristotle and then, later, in Dionysius of Halicarnassus's summary of Romulus's state. In the account of the idealized state in his *Republic*, Plato prioritizes children of elite parentage and stipulates that infants who are "born defective (ἀνάπηρον)" should be concealed in a remote place (ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ τε καὶ ἀδήλῳ) (460c). Plato provides eugenic

⁴⁶ Cicero, *Leg.* 3.19 (Keyes, LCL). In the reconstruction of the Twelve Tables, this stipulation can be found at 4.1. See *The Twelve Tables* (trans. Paul R. Coleman-Norton; The Project Gutenberg, 2005, rev. 2020; <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14783>).

⁴⁷ There is a strand of secondary literature that also attributes to the Twelve Tables legal permission for infanticide of female children (e.g., research relying on Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; New York: Paulist Press, 1982] 25, 105 n. 25). This appears to be a conflation of Cicero's citation and material on exposure from Dionysius of Halicarnassus (drawing incorrectly on H. Bennett, "The Exposure of Infants in Ancient Rome," *The Classical Journal* 18 [1923] 342–43). Dionysius's inconsistent references to past Roman communities raising children includes one reference to abandonment of females, though he does not connect this with the Twelve Tables. On Dionysius, see further below.

⁴⁸ Indeed, as Shaw, Saller, and Arjava have demonstrated, there is no reference to such a right in legal documentation and no reference at all until material from the 4th–6th cents. CE (Shaw, "Raising," 31; Saller, "Patriarchy, Property," 102–32; Arjava, "Paternal Power," 153). Even when Constantine later states a legal prohibition of infanticide, Shaw argues he was restating the existing law, not overturning it ("Raising," 76). See *C.Th.* 5.9.1; 5.10.1; 11.27.1–2; Kelley, "The Deformed Child in Ancient Christianity," in *Children* (ed. Horn and Phenix), 199–225, at 201. Shaw also notes linguistic style, claiming the references reflect a later archaizing of language, rather than language that might have been preserved from earlier sources, such as the use of *nex* (Shaw, "Raising," 58–59).

⁴⁹ Seneca the Elder presents a hypothetical legal case over the claims of a birth father of twin sons he had abandoned (*Controv.* 9.3). As in the other *Controversies*, the text illustrates declamation through a variety of views; Romanius Hispo, who is portrayed with negative views of a father who would abandon sons, claims the father remains purely self-interested, in keeping with his earlier "savagery of the exposure." He concludes, "He is a harsh and cruel father; do not believe that he can change so quickly from such brutality" (*Controv.* 9.3.11 Winterbottom, LCL). Though a story of exposure and not infanticide, the common features of twin sons, self-interested father, and questions of whether the father might be capable of change show interesting parallels to the negative portrait of Antipatros.

reasons for these measures. Aristotle becomes more explicit, advocating for a law that “no deformed child (πεπρωμένον) shall be reared” (*Pol.* 1335b). Here, Aristotle imagines a range of laws that he would like to see enforced, including exercise for pregnant women and prohibiting procreative sex when couples are either younger or older than an ideal age, to improve the quality of offspring. It is clear in the broader context of both Plato’s and Aristotle’s accounts that the texts are theorizing about the conditions of an ideal human community, but they are not describing any real legal framework. This still passes judgment upon children with deformities (as also on inactive pregnant women), though it is interesting that few later works take up their ideas.

One key, though much later, writer, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, offers mixed information about the treatment of unwanted children in his first-century BCE Greek historiography, *Roman Antiquities*. At 9.22.2, he claims that Romans since ancient times were obligated to raise all their children, without exception. But elsewhere he asserts that Romans of Romulus’s time were required to rear all sons and at least first-born daughters, with the further caveat that they may not “destroy any children under three years of age unless they were maimed or monstrous (ἀνάπηρον ἢ τέρας) from their very birth” (*Ant. rom.* 2.15.2).⁵⁰ In the event that children in these exceptional cases were to be killed (through exposure), Dionysius indicates that the five closest neighbors needed to consent. Dionysius’s historiography famously presents an interest in antiquated practices of the Roman past (as is common in literature of the imperial period). He focuses on reframing a romanticized past to which the present time is in some ways beholden but from which it has also developed. Dionysius is not, notably, suggesting that such infanticide continues to his present day but is providing a primeval legal framework that he attributes to the legendary Romulus (himself a foundling). Here, the archaic “past” is a kind of “other.”

A range of other sources on infanticide, including infanticide of children with infirmities, likewise situates the practice within a description of another group, from which the author and implied audience are importantly distinct. In particular, some ethnographic sources include infanticide as part of communicating a stereotype of others. For instance, looking back from his own first-century CE Roman position, Quintus Curtius describes Alexander’s progress through India. He attributes to “the barbarians” the belief that their group “excels in wisdom” and goes on to observe:

The children that are born they acknowledge and rear, not according to the discretion of their parents, but of those to whom the charge of the physical examination of children has been committed. If these have noted any who are

⁵⁰ Dionysius distinguishes between exposure that will destroy infants (permitted here only for those with deformities) and simply not raising some children through abandonment (see nn. 45 and 47 above).

conspicuous for defects or are crippled in some part of their limbs, they give orders to put them to death. (Quint. Curt. *Alex.* 9.1.24–25)⁵¹

Immediately following, other customs are mentioned. The differences between the priorities of marriage in Roman society and those of this Indian group as constructed by the text (such as marrying for beauty alone) are expounded, furthering the exotic but ultimately negative portrait of the society's priorities and traditions.⁵² Similarly, Caesar's *Gallic War* criticizes the Gauls for their treatment of wives and children, including infanticide and, for instance, earlier funerary fires that burned the deceased's "slaves and dependents" (*Bell. gall.* 6.19). This construction of the Gallic past serves to underscore Rome's superiority for the reader.⁵³

In the same way, from his early second-century vantage point, Plutarch offers a detailed description of the Spartans in his *Life of Lycurgus*. Significantly, the archaizing treatment of the Spartans interacts with implications of more primitive habits in early Rome. So he can say:

The elders of the tribes officially examined the infant, and if it was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it, and assigned it one of the nine thousand lots of land; but if it was ill-born and deformed (*ἀγεννῆς καὶ ἄμορφον*), they sent it to the so-called Apothetae, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Tāygetus, in the conviction that the life of that which nature had not well equipped at the very beginning for health and strength, was of no advantage either to itself or the state. (Plut. *Lyc.* 16.1–2)

Plutarch also offers an account of diagnostic activities the women would engage in, bathing infants in wine, which would distinguish "epileptic and sickly infants" from "the healthy ones" (16.2).⁵⁴ The passage continues with Spartan customs in raising children, and the claim that Spartan nurses were sought after by Roman parents (16.3).

A key element in these descriptions lies in the affirmation that the Rome of the writer's time has moved beyond these earlier traditions, whether of Romulus's Rome or the Rome that admires the Spartans' customs. It is a romantic construction of a possible past, rather than texts to give historical weight. In Plutarch's account of the Spartans, infanticide contributes to polemic against the foreign other.⁵⁵ And in

⁵¹ See further discussion in Kelley, "The Deformed Child," 202.

⁵² Much earlier (5th-cent. BCE) depictions of Amazons also reflect this dynamic (see Fantham, *Women*, 133).

⁵³ Sneed argues that these sources are more ethnography than law ("Disability," 751). Going further, Shaw argues convincingly that these references participate in a later antiquating trend, contrasting earlier groups with the implied reader's norms ("Raising," 59; see also n. 48 above).

⁵⁴ The issue of the disease's invisibility is discussed below.

⁵⁵ Gosbell notes research that refutes the historicity of Plutarch's portrait of the Spartans on archaeological grounds; instead, this reference is part of his "anti-Spartan invective" (*The Poor*, 90 n. 298).

portraits of Rome like that of Dionysius's, even when infanticide is mentioned, it is to set out some *limitations* on the situations in which it was permissible.⁵⁶

Recent archaeological studies indicate that children with various infirmities were raised, including those with conditions like cleft palate that would have been evident from birth.⁵⁷ Hippocratic sources describe treatments for limb abnormalities from birth.⁵⁸ Indeed, disability theory helps to illuminate the unhelpful (and unhistorical) binaries that lie behind an assumption that children with visible impairments or disfigurements were considered not worth raising; many infants, children, and adults in antiquity navigated life with some kind of impairment, whether congenital or acquired through accident or poor nutrition.⁵⁹ Neither Cicero's implied requirement of infanticide of "deformed" newborns nor the prescriptions in Plato's or Aristotle's idealized states appear to have been enforced.

In addition to these references to infanticide, proponents of some philosophies are more outspoken in their criticism. Stoics express particularly strong disapproval (see especially first-century Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus, frag. 15),⁶⁰ as do Jewish and Christian groups. Casting such practices as the negative habits of others is also a key feature of the references in early Christian texts and, I suggest, illuminates the polemic against Antipatros in the Acts of John episode.

3. Infanticide and othering in early Christian texts: Early Christian texts foster strong polemic about the immorality of infanticide, building on earlier Jewish and other opposition to such practices (cf. Wis 12:5; Philo Spec. 3.110–116; Jos. C. Ap. 2.202).⁶¹ The Christian texts explicitly set themselves against other groups that

⁵⁶ The emphasis on *quick* death for infants with severe deformities in Cicero's reference to the Twelve Tables may likewise be seen as a limitation to exclude exposure's slow death.

⁵⁷ See especially, on material evidence of ceramic feeding bottles suitable for babies with cleft palate, Sneed, "Disability," 747–72. Sneed summarizes: "It was neither legally mandated nor typical in ancient Greece to kill or expose disabled infants, and uncritical (and unfounded) statements to the contrary are both dangerous and harmful" (747).

⁵⁸ See discussion of the Hippocratic *On Joints* 62 in Sneed, "Disability," 753–56.

⁵⁹ Laes, "Raising," 130, 139–40; Véronique Dasen, "Naitre et grandir différent dans le monde grec," in *Décrypter la différence. Lecture archéologique et historique de la place des personnes handicapées au sein des communautés du passé* (ed. Valérie Delattre and Ryadh Sallem; Paris: CQFD, 2009) 49–63; Graham, "Disparate Lives," 249, 258.

⁶⁰ Eyben underscores, however, that Musonius does not reference disability in relation to exposure or infanticide ("Family Planning," 41 n. 130). Strands of critique of both infanticide and exposure extend from earlier times. As Garland summarizes, "In the end we can say nothing with certainty about exposure in Athens, other than that intellectuals were divided on the issue—Euripides and Sophokles disapproved, while Aristotle recommended it as part of his population policy" (*Greek Way*, 92). Later, some locations also appear to have developed laws against exposure, e.g., Thebes and Ephesus (see Eyben, "Family Planning," 23–24).

⁶¹ In the Hebrew Bible, Pharaoh is the negative Other in Exod 1:8–22; though cf. YHWH's response in Exod 12:29–32. Notably, the NT does not include any reference to infanticide (aside from the clearly negative slaughter of children in Matt 2:16–18). Philo is scathing about the "sacrilegious practice" of infanticide, attributing its implicit prohibition to Moses, in *Spec.* 3.110–116; cf. *Virt.* 128–33. Josephus is likewise negative (*Apion* 2.202). On Philo and Josephus, see Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018)

they claim practice infanticide. In unpacking the features it claims make Christians superior to those of other local traditions, the second-century⁶² Greek Epistle to Diognetus explains that Christians “marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born” (5.6). Similarly, the *Didache* and the Epistle of Barnabas include the instruction “do not abort a fetus or kill a child that is already born” among a list of commandments for those on the path of light (Barn. 19.5; cf. *Did.* 2.2), which contrasts by implication with the practices of those on the alternate path.⁶³ In a detailed tour of the afterlife, the Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter—dated to the first half of the second century and providing the earliest surviving Christian tour of hell⁶⁴—lists groups of people who had committed particular sins, including a section that details explicitly the punishment of parents who committed infanticide (Eth. Apoc. Pet. 8.8).⁶⁵

In this way, like other Greek and Roman texts that include infanticide among the traits of a foreign or otherwise different other, the Christian texts construct an opposing group using graphic language. The Christian rhetoric in these texts gives less attention to historical questions about the behavior of rival groups than it does to rendering another group as monstrous. These criticisms help to illuminate a second-century reader’s reaction to Antipatros’s plan.

4. Implications for the narrative about Antipatros and his sons: The texts surveyed in the previous sections suggest a number of implications for audience responses to Antipatros’s plan to take his sons’ lives. It seems unlikely that a second-century reader would simply accept a father’s right to kill his adult son. They may be aware of people practicing infanticide, though also of others who raise children with infirmities. But, for literary texts, by this time infanticide is associated with foreign communities rather than with (superior) contemporary Romans. Early Christian texts take this polemical use even further.

The examples closest to the scenario in the Acts of John might be those that describe the infanticide of newborns with various infirmities (including, in Plutarch’s account of the Spartans, epilepsy), and where a larger group is required to give permission. An understanding of such descriptions may lie behind Antipatros’s claim to have consulted his family (56.24–25).⁶⁶ However, given the extremely negative

160–61; Kelley, “The Deformed Child,” 202–3; William V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *JRS* 84 (1994) 1–22, at 6–7. See also Koskenneimi, *Exposure*; Fantham, *Women*, 249.

⁶² Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers* (vol. 2; LCL 25; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 127.

⁶³ Each of these texts shows a particular interest in ethical instruction in the “two ways” tradition, drawing on earlier wisdom literature and Ps 1, to distinguish between the ways of righteousness and of wickedness.

⁶⁴ Henning, *Hell*, 3.

⁶⁵ See discussion of this passage in *ibid.*, 3–5, 51; Patrick Gray, “Abortion, Infanticide, and the Social Rhetoric of the Apocalypse of Peter,” *J ECS* 9 (2001) 313–37; Kelley, “The Deformed Child,” 202.

⁶⁶ Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.15.2; Quintus Curtius, *Alexander*, 9.1.24–25; Plutarch, *Lyc.* 16.1–2.

characterization of infanticide wherever it is mentioned in other early Christian texts, it is most likely that the Antipatros account presumes an audience that would not view the destruction of offspring sympathetically.⁶⁷ Moreover, Antipatros's claim is about killing adult children, relevant examples of which relate to a clash of civic duties and paternal affection for erring sons. These are not about the murder of those with infirmities and related economic considerations.

Thus, when the reader discovers that Antipatros was planning to kill his sons,⁶⁸ it seems the realization would not create sympathy, aligning the situation with an accepted, if tragic, practice made necessary by difficult circumstances. Rather, it would feed into these caricatures of the monstrous other, who could countenance murdering even their own children. In these ways, Antipatros's masculinity is also drawn into the criticism. In the Roman world, masculinity is presented on a sliding scale; individuals may be identified with various forms or strata of unmanliness as they are shown to fall short of the ideal masculine type. Deeply tied to virtue, self-mastery is a central attribute for the performance of masculinity, and a feature that is likewise considered basic to the capacity to rule over others.⁶⁹ Thus, by aligning Antipatros with behavior so emphatically unvirtuous in early Christian literature, the text undermines the masculinity Antipatros might claim as a leading man of Smyrna (56.3), and removes the basis of his masculine right to rule over others. In these ways, the passage does not support Antipatros's plan, or his performance of his role as father or disciple. Further features of the text confirm this negative portrayal.

B. Economics and Mercy

Antipatros's economic interests are also a source of critique. When Antipatros seeks John's assistance for himself, in his old age, he suggests his sons' infirmities threaten his economic means. Such economic matters do feature in texts about parents and children with disabilities in antiquity. Later Christian material, while still denouncing the exposure of infants, shows an increased tendency to attend to the economic reasons that led parents to consider this option, as evident in

⁶⁷ Additionally, poisoning had particularly negative connotations—despite the renowned examples, most notably Socrates's ultimate expression of piety (van Hooff, *From Autothanasia*, 59–62). The negative attitude toward poisoning likely relates to common fears of being murdered through a secret poisoning attack.

⁶⁸ Threats of murder (and even their implementation) are not uncommon in Apocryphal Acts, though they are not presented positively.

⁶⁹ See Maud W. Gleason, "Elite Male Identity in the Roman Empire," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (ed. David Stone Potter and D. J. Mattingly; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 67–84, at 72. Gleason also discusses models of masculinity that valued indulgence and excess, though (as the following section supports) this would not be valued by readers of the Acts of John. Reflecting on early Christian conceptions of masculine virtue, Jennifer Eyl considers the effects of asceticism on the form of masculinity idealized in Apocryphal Acts ("Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality* [ed. Benjamin H. Dunning; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019] 387–404).

the fourth-century Greek writings of Basil of Caesarea. In Basil's *Letters* 217 to Amphilocheus, he states:

Let the woman who neglected her new-born child on the road, if, though able to save it, she condemned it, either thinking thereby to conceal her sin or scheming in a manner altogether bestly and inhuman, be judged as for murder. But if she could not care for it, and it died both on account of the wilderness and the lack of necessities, the mother is to be pardoned. (217.52 [Deferrari, LCL])⁷⁰

In Stephen Friesen's poverty scale, those with disabilities, given exclusion from employment, share a place in the lowest socioeconomic category, "below subsistence level," with unattached widows, beggars, prisoners, and so on, making up, by his estimate, 28 percent of the urban population in the Roman Empire.⁷¹ More recently, however, Emma-Jayne Graham has provided evidence of manual work fulfilled by people with physical impairments, challenging assumptions that people with disabilities did not participate economically.⁷² Nonetheless, for Antipatros, old age is a reason to request mercy, first for himself, and only then for his sons (Acts of John 56.17), claiming, at least, the financial drain of his sons' condition.

Further aspects of Antipatros's portrait raise doubts about his financial excuse. The amount of gold he claims to have available to pay John might be hyperbolic (and possibly intended to indicate desperation), as noted above, but he was introduced as one of the elite (πρωτος) of Smyrna. The audience is invited to wonder whether they should trust Antipatros and his claim of impending hardship.

Indeed, economic issues are a key concern in the Acts of John, in which generosity to the poor and voluntary poverty are hallmarks of true discipleship.⁷³ Preaching in Ephesus, John claims that he is "no merchant who buys or exchanges goods," but through him Christ will lead the crowd away from their error of having been "sold into ignominious lusts" (33.5–9). He warns: "do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth," and, particularly relevant, "Do not think, if you have children, to rest on them, and do not seek to rob and defraud on their account!" (34.4–7). Rather, the poor should not mourn, or the rich rejoice in their treasures, which can offer no consolation (36.1–4, 10–13). Indeed (suggesting a dependence upon Luke

⁷⁰ For a fuller discussion of Basil's treatment of disfiguration and infanticide, as well as an argument for an increasing appreciation for economic factors, see Kelley, "The Deformed Child," 206.

⁷¹ Stephen Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," *JSNT* 26 (2004) 323–61, at 340–43. The generality of "the Roman Empire" limits Friesen's analysis. He acknowledges difficulties generalizing across geography (338), but not over time, though he draws data predominantly from the 1st cent. Friesen's estimates have not gone unchallenged (see the essays in *Paul and Economics: A Handbook* [ed. Thomas R. Blanton and Raymond Pickett; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017]; Bruce Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," *JSNT* 31 [2009] 243–78).

⁷² Graham, "Disparate Lives," 265–66.

⁷³ Renouncing worldly possessions is also a common theme in the Latin text *Virtutes Iohannis*, which Elliott notes is among the material suggested for the lacunae in the Acts of John (Elliott, *The Apocryphal*, 304).

16.19–31): “If you kept your treasures without helping the poor, having left this body and being in the flames of the fire, you will find no one who will have mercy on you when you are begging for mercy” (35.5–8).

In the final sentence of the pericope involving Antipatros, after the healing, John likewise exhorts Antipatros to voluntary poverty and generosity to the poor: “John besought Antipatros to give his money to those in need” (57.9–10). It is a hefty ask in light of the large sum initially mooted in the negotiation over the healing. Antipatros makes no response. He has been undermined from his opening speech by caring not about his sons directly but about a healing that would reverse their inability to provide for him and release him from the cost of supporting them. Despite other indications of Antipatros’s elite status, moreover, his failures here go to a weakness in his performance of masculinity as *paterfamilias* and perhaps even reveal a hope (as disparaged in the Acts of John 34.5–7) to rest on the contribution of his children. Indeed, his concern about economic hardship, when he occupies such a position of advantage, suggests a desire to maintain an economic position that is criticized in interactions about discipleship across the Acts of John.

C. *Calling a Spade a Spade*

The narrative portrays Antipatros critically not only through his murderous plans and unsympathetic economic interests but through a persistent identity label; arguably, the most obvious thing about Antipatros is his name. In a study of the twenty-six character names used across the Acts of John, Boris Paschke identifies sixteen that he claims are “speaking names.”⁷⁴ He draws on studies of ancient comedies to illustrate this literary tradition of naming characters in ways that either confirm, or ironically counter (through antiphrasis), some key feature of their character, behavior, or context. The fifth- to fourth-century BCE playwright, Aristophanes, is a prominent user of this tradition. Similarly, Plautus, a playwright of Latin comedies in the third and second centuries BCE, portrays a character, who is a “moneylender and profiteer” and obsessed by money, called *Misargyrides*, a name based on the Greek *μισαργυρία*, “hatred or contempt of money.”⁷⁵

This same tradition is at play in the Acts of John. Callimachus (*Καλλιμάχος*), meaning beautiful or noble fighter, aggressively pursues Drusiana, even to the point of making arrangements to rape her corpse (Acts of John 62–71). He is certainly a fighter but is far from noble, as the narrative underscores, describing him as “a servant of Satan” (63.2).⁷⁶ Similarly, Fortunatus is the ironic embodiment of one

⁷⁴ Boris Paschke, “Speaking Names in the Apocryphal Acts of John,” *Apocrypha* 26 (2015) 119–49, at 124. In his attempt to find as many speaking names as possible, Paschke discusses some less-convincing examples, which he admits himself toward the paper’s end (148). Those creating an ironic tension between the attributes implied by a name and the character’s attributes are, however, very convincing, as in the examples given here.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 123; cf. Plautus, *Most.* 532–654.

⁷⁶ Paschke, “Speaking names,” 140–43.

touched by *Fortuna*, with her good fortune *and* capricious changes of fortune.⁷⁷ He first encounters wealth but, unluckily, dies from a snakebite; then, by apparently good fortune, he is raised, but he is later reported to have died from the venom still circulating in his body (70–86).

Antipatros's name includes much of the same irony and humor.⁷⁸ The way he is introduced, as "a certain man by name Antipatros," may also serve to draw attention to the significance of his name.⁷⁹ The prefix ἀντι- supplies numerous meanings in the Greek, including that "one person or thing is 'instead of' another," or—perhaps surprisingly—"equivalent to" another.⁸⁰ In this way, the prefix can come to mean either a thing or its opposite. This is an ambivalence that, Paschke argues, the author exploits. But while the name creates ambiguity, I suggest the behavior ensures that—like Callimachus or Fortunatus—what emerges is irony. Antipatros is presented as the father, and named as ὁ πατήρ explicitly in 57.7, but through his actions he is cast as the opposite.⁸¹

Indeed, Antipatros himself is the greatest threat his sons face. What he presents as an attempt to secure the sons' welfare has, since the beginning of the passage, been framed as an effort to protect his own position. He initially exhorted John to "assist me in my old age" (56.14), and he closes by saying, "Take pity on me and on them" (56.17)—in that order. When he comes to focus, finally, on the needs of the sons ("for their sake, enlighten them and help them"; 56.26–27), his request is for John to intervene to save the sons from his own plan to take their lives. He is indeed the opposite of a good father.

Thus, as Callimachus is a fighter, but without the nobility implied by his name, and Fortunatus, although initially lucky, is ultimately a victim of a capricious change of fortune, Antipatros is both "like or equal to" a father and its opposite. He *is* the father of the sons but acts as their adversary.

D. A Disconnected Dialogue

Disjointed moments in the dialogue between Antipatros and John, with the sons and the crowd all standing by silently, also contribute to the way the text undermines Antipatros. The following diagram shows the moments of disconnection, as Antipatros and John speak or act past each other.

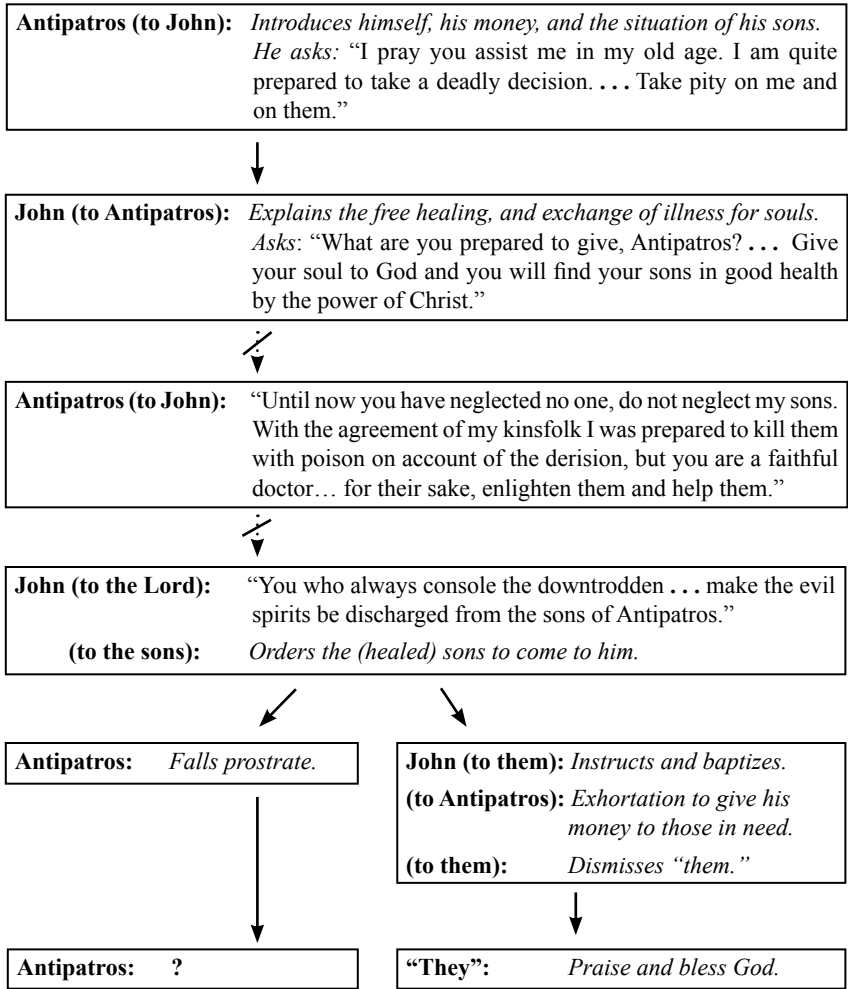
⁷⁷ Kylie Crabbe, *Luke/Acts and the End of History* (BZNW 238; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019) 140–46.

⁷⁸ In an article on humor in the Acts of John, Spittler cites this episode briefly as among the text's few dark episodes ("Joking," 223). Although certainly dark, it is interesting that even here there is a comedy influence in features like Antipatros's name.

⁷⁹ Paschke, "Speaking names," 139.

⁸⁰ The "instead of" meaning could also link back to the exchange—that Antipatros is invited to exchange the sons' infirmity for his soul, creating irony, because Antipatros rejects the exchange and John heals out of compassion instead.

⁸¹ Paschke notes both positive (seeking help, offering a large sum, asking for mercy) and negative elements of Antipatros's portrait as father (Paschke, "Speaking names," 138–39). However, as argued, I suggest all of these features show ambiguity and self-motivation. In the text's critique of Antipatros, the "speaking name" draws out the irony.



After Antipatros’s initial speech and John’s response, Antipatros simply ignores John’s question, “What are you prepared to give?” (56.20). Rather than complying with the terms of John’s transaction, he objects that John has not neglected anyone else and he simply reiterates his request (focused on his own position in this potential healing). This time he clarifies his threat on the sons’ lives (56.24–25).

John is immediately moved to action. In an important shift of dynamic, rather than addressing Antipatros further, he turns to address the Lord in prayer. Antipatros’s final words were “for their sake, enlighten them and help them” (56.26–27), and the narration goes to the effort of an extra term to show the parallel in John’s response, describing his action as a result of “having been called upon” (57.1). John then prays: “You who always console the downtrodden and who called me

to aid, you who have never waited to be called to console because you are present before we seek your assistance, make the evil spirits be discharged from the sons of Antipatros” (57.1–5).

It is not clear whether assistance was previously necessary, though it is notable that John did not initially reject Antipatros’s claims about the need for healing. Rather, he refuted the particular kind of financial (rather than spiritual) exchange Antipatros proposed. But the dialogue clarifies that this healing help now is required urgently to save the sons’ lives, not from the illness, but from their father. The illness could cause social exclusion and other distressing experiences, including the potential risk to life through the possibility of a seizure while bathing (56.10), but the condition does not generally pose an imminent risk of death. By contrast, the father is an immediate and genuine danger.

After the successful exorcism, John calls not Antipatros but the sons to him. The interaction is not so much a “dialogue” as Antipatros failing to acknowledge John, and John turning instead to prayer and then to address the sons.

E. The Ambiguous Ending

Having undermined Antipatros’s character in these various ways, uncertainty remains at the end of the narrative. The narrative does not describe a visual element to the exorcism or explain how it is known that the frequently invisible ailment is gone; there is thus apparently need to clarify: “the father saw them in good health” (57.6–7). While John focuses on the sons (their “falling sickness” cured), now it is *Antipatros* who falls over at the sight of their recovery. But Antipatros falls and lies prostrate (ἔπεσεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν) before John (57.7). The προσκυνέω terminology suggests worship, and perhaps this is a response of conversion and piety. Or perhaps it is another case of Antipatros’s missing the mark, worshiping John instead of understanding John’s point that he himself is not the healer.⁸²

The reader is then told that John baptizes “them”⁸³ and exhorts Antipatros “to give his money to those in need” (57.10). Finally, John dismisses “them” and “they” praise and bless God. Throughout the narrative, a firm distinction has been made between Antipatros and his sons. It is a distinction Antipatros himself underscores, such as in his call for mercy upon “me and them”—there is no “us.” Each reference to αὐτοί in the pericope until now refers to the sons only, and that is the main way

⁸² If this is simply an initial misunderstanding, it is not necessarily an indictment of Antipatros. There are other examples in early Christian literature in which characters understand in two stages, initially worshipping the apostle before focusing on Christ as the healing’s source. Here, uncertainty remains at the end of the episode (cf. Acts 14:8–18, where the continuing misunderstanding is explicitly mentioned). John’s reference to “my healer” already predicts such a confusion (Acts John 56.18).

⁸³ Junod and Kaestli suggest this is a later interpolation, based on what they identify as anacoluthon in the text’s mention of the Trinity and baptism (*Acta Iohannis*, 1:242–43; see also Klauck, *The Apocryphal*, 18, *pace* Elliott, who does not indicate interpolation [*The Apocryphal*, 327]). Although the only reference to baptism in the extant Acts of John, it is consistent with common representations of Christian conversion and initiation in the 2nd and 3rd cents. (including in other Apocryphal Acts).

to which they are (namelessly) referred. Perhaps part of the healing here has been to draw the family together under the one pronoun, praising and blessing God. Or perhaps all of these αὐτοί references still simply refer to the sons. They have been called to John. They have responded. They have been baptized—with a trinitarian formula that may yet suggest some tension between the πατήρ of the formula and the Antipatros of their reality. They have been dismissed and leave with faithful responses; the plural pronoun means it must be *at least* the sons who have this response.

But the question is: Is Antipatros among them? All the reader may be sure of is that initially Antipatros did not seem open to the exchange of his soul for his sons' health, though he is astonished at or grateful for the healing, and that he (like other would-be disciples) has been exhorted to give away his money. Will he respond to the final request to give away his gold pieces, and will he be a better disciple than he has been a father? Or is this yet another disconnect in Antipatros's engagement with John? The episode ends without resolving these questions.

■ Conclusion

The story of Antipatros and his sons offers a case study that fills out the picture of attitudes to disability in early Christian literature. The treatment is, unsurprisingly, not simple. Within the comedic and dramatic elements of the narrative, clear criticism of Antipatros and his proposed strategy to address the problems arising (in his own life) from his sons' impairments shines through. By way of Antipatros's initial offer of a huge payment for healing, the passage ties its criticism into a wider denigration of extortionate medical practices. Antipatros then comes under sustained criticism as both father and inquiring disciple through his threat of murder, economic circumstances, and name. The structure of the narrative supports the negative portrait, while leaving his ultimate choices ambiguous. In the end, the sons are healed, an act that will, according to Antipatros, remove derision and improve his economic prospects. But, significantly, the healing is prompted not by the initial description of the sons' symptoms but by Antipatros's declaration of his intent to kill his sons. He is the most urgent threat to their safety, prompting John to act swiftly.

While the passage critiques Antipatros' failures, however, it still makes the story about him. The text leaves the sons silent and unnamed. There is no attempt to delve into their own account of their experiences—for instance, as their father explains (to a stranger) his intention to take their lives, as he sets out the daily manifestations of their infirmity and its cost (to him), or as the stranger turns to them in prayer, healing, and baptism. There is a final account of their praise following their baptism, but not the particular words of which it might be comprised. Like other episodes in the Acts of John, the flawed and (potentially, eventually) redeemed elite, male characters like Andronicus and Callimachus (Acts of John 62–86), and here Antipatros, are the focus as cautionary characters, while the characters presented

wholly positively, like Drusiana (Acts of John 62–86), or Antipatros’s unnamed sons, are idealized, and often silent. Here, the text leverages the sons’ silence in order to “move the narrative forward”⁸⁴ with respect to the plot-points in which it is interested: the errors of Antipatros and a pedagogical threat of the consequences of such failures. And in this regard, it uses the sons and their silence as a crutch.

But, contrary to Mitchell and Snyder’s description of narrative prosthesis, the narrative dynamic here does not rely ultimately on *negative attitudes to disability*. Quite the reverse: it relies on negative attitudes in the wider context of early Christianity toward infanticide as a response to infirmity and to disciples who cling to economic and social advantage. In the story of Antipatros, we encounter a second-century text’s critique of a character whose attitudes lead him to contemplate destruction of those with infirmities. In response, the apostle turns to invoke divine consolation of those whose presence in the story is, and to a large degree remains, obscured.

⁸⁴ This language comes from Ronald Charles’s description of the uses of slaves in pseudepigrapha and early Christian texts (*The Silencing of Slaves in Early Jewish and Christian Texts* [Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World; London: Routledge, 2019] 16). Using a postcolonial method that seeks to unearth slaves within texts in which they are silent or absent—and yet ubiquitous to the narrative world—Charles highlights the ways slaves are used by authors to further the activities of powerful characters and support their socio-rhetorical purposes.