

PRAXIS

Reading the *Apocryphon of John* as Genesis fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—This reading of the late antique Coptic apocryphal work the *Apocryphon of John* (*Ap. John*) as Bible fan fiction finds that *Ap. John* uses the same transformative techniques as fan fiction, but that the manner in which these transformations are legitimized depends on the Christian tradition *Ap. John* is part of. Several strategies for transforming canon are operative in *Ap. John*. Even when Genesis is subverted in *Ap. John*, the rewriting of canonical material is legitimized through strategies already established in other biblical texts. In this manner, *Ap. John* uses canon to subvert canon.

[0.2] Keywords—Christian apocrypha; Coptic; Nag Hammadi

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Monotheism and the belief that the one God is the creator of the universe are central tenets of Christianity. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, central in defining Christian orthodoxy, states in its opening line, "We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible" ([note 1](#)). The story of creation from the book of Genesis constitutes the central scriptural foundation for this belief. However, other takes on the story of creation existed in late antiquity. The same canonical material that was used to support the creed also served as the source text for alternative creation narratives. The following text, from the *Apocryphon of John* (*Ap. John*, also known as *The Secret Book of John*)—a late antique work preserved in Coptic—challenges the understanding that the supreme God and the creator are identical:

[1.2] He saw the creation beneath him and the multitude of angels beneath him, these who had come forth from him. He said to them, "I am a jealous god. Without me there is no one," already indicating to the angels beneath him that there is another god. For if there were not another, of whom would he be jealous? ([note 2](#))

[1.3] This description of the creator indicates that he is not in fact the only god. The Genesis narrative, from the creation to the flood, is significantly changed in *Ap. John*, with new details, new interpretations, and a reversal of the roles of heroes and villains. In this transformative practice, *Ap. John* resembles fan fiction, which does what literature has always done: it adapts, rewrites, and transforms older stories, characters, and plots. Reading *Ap. John* as fan fiction opens up new analytic

categories, and it provides opportunities to compare the transformative writing of an early Christian apocryphon with the transformative writing of today's fan fiction.

2. Canon and apocrypha

[2.1] Sherlock Holmes fans adopted the word *canon* after the Catholic priest Monsignor Ronald Knox (2011) presented a satirical lecture where he discussed chronology, internal conflicts, and authorship of the Holmes stories with methods known from biblical studies (Busse 2017). Fandom in general has played with the religious connotations of the term ever since. The terms "Word of God" for statements from an author or director or "The Powers That Be" for those in control of a media product are other examples of such adaption of religious terms in fan speak (<https://fanlore.org/>). Definitions of canon in fan fiction studies, such as Sheenagh Pugh's "the source material accepted as authentic...within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk tale were once commonly known" (2006, 26) and Kristina Busse's "collection of texts considered to be the authoritative source for fan creations" (2017, 101), show that even in this new context, the term retains meaning it developed in early Christianity.

[2.2] The word *canon* is derived from the Greek word for "measuring rod." In early Christianity, it could mean both "rule" and "list." Its earliest use was primarily in the first sense, as a standard something was measured against, "the normative quality, or the authoritativeness, of certain books" (Thomassen 2010, 9). From the middle of the fourth century CE, the term gradually came to signify a (closed) collection of texts, which eventually became the list of biblical books deemed to be authoritative by the church hierarchy (McDonald 2007). The act of making lists of canonical books therefore did not simply document which books were considered authoritative. It was also an act of excluding books that should not be given such status. Many canon lists included warnings against reading apocrypha (Gallagher and Meade 2017).

[2.3] The word *apocryphon* is from Greek and means "hidden" or "secret." *Ap. John* is a self-designated apocryphon; indeed, the term occurs in the title of the book in all the extant manuscripts. *Ap. John* is therefore *The Secret Book of John*, a book with a message not meant for all but rather reserved for a select few. This meaning corresponds well with the contents of the book. However, in early Christian discourse, the meaning of the term shifted from the pre-Christian positive understanding of a book of esoteric wisdom and came to signal noncanonical, fraudulent, or heretical works (Shoemaker 2008). This shift is linked to how the emerging Christian orthodoxy gained control of canon by linking it to the church hierarchy (Pagels 1989; Brakke 1994). According to orthodox understanding, there could be no new or secret revelations. Christ had appointed apostles to bring his message to the world. The apostles had handed down the responsibility and authority to interpret the message to their successors, the bishops of the church. Therefore, only writings recognized by the church hierarchy as deriving from the apostles or their closest associates could be deemed authentic.

[2.4] For centuries, stories similar to the rewritten creation narrative in *Ap. John* were only known through their opponents (Christian heresiologists like Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Tertullian), who referred to them when arguing against their teachings and authenticity (Pagels 1989; Williams 1996; King 2003). As a result of this process, *Ap. John*, along with other such subversive narratives, disappeared from the Christian tradition until manuscripts containing mostly unknown Christian apocrypha were discovered in Egypt in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

3. Fan fiction as a heuristic lens

[3.1] Despite many parallels, I do not suggest that *Ap. John* is fan fiction, though definitions such as Pugh's "fiction based on a situation or characters originally created by someone else" (2006, 9) would allow it to be characterized as such. Instead, I see fan fiction as providing a set of tools that

may be used to better understand early Christian transformative writing. The special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," successfully uses "fandom, its practices, and its vocabularies...as a heuristic lens to open up new approaches to classical, medieval, and early modern texts" (Willis 2016, ¶ 1.6). This issue demonstrates that although not all transformative work should be considered fan fiction, the discussion of fan fiction in relation to the classical canon can lead to new insights into both. It is through this same heuristic lens that I explore *Ap. John*.

[3.2] Shannon K. Farley (2016) offers a theoretical framework for comparing fan fiction and other transformative works. From the vantage point of translation studies, she extends André Lefevere's (1992) notion of rewriting by adding fan fiction to the forms of rewriting. Farley treats all these forms as transformative. Like Lefevere, she applies systems theory, in which systems consist of texts, readers and writers, cultural expectations, and norms.

[3.3] According to Farley, a literary system places a "a series of normative constraints" (2016, ¶ 2.1) on writers: "When a text is rewritten, it is rewritten to satisfy the requirements of a particular system, in form or in ideology" (¶ 2.1). Farley shows how different translations of Homer are transformative works, rewritten to fit the systems of their time and place. Transformative works "make the same transformative moves" (¶ 1.3) as fan fiction does, "informed by the system in which the rewriter is writing" (¶ 1.3). While Farley focuses on how the rewriting is governed by the constraints of the system, Lefevere additionally allows for rewriting that

[3.4] choose[s] to oppose the system, to try to operate outside of its constraints; for instance by reading works of literature in other than received ways, by writing works of literature in ways that differ from those prescribed or deemed acceptable at a particular time in a particular place, or by rewriting works of literature in such a manner that they do not fit in with the dominant poetics or ideology of a given time and place. (1992, 10)

[3.5] Still, it is the system that supplies the constraints the writer is conforming to or writing against. The time, place, and social group of the texts inform which transformations need to be done, and how they can be done. Fan fiction and other forms of rewriting thus have transformative elements in common, although the context in which the rewriting is done differs.

[3.6] Fan fiction transforms its source material in numerous ways. Henry Jenkins lists ten possible ways to rewrite a TV show, highlighting different strategies that fan fiction authors use to "rewrite and rework [a primary text], repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored" (2012, 162). Jenkins's strategies are recontextualization, expanding the series time line, refocalization, moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and eroticization. Jenkins does not present his list as exhaustive; nor does he suggest that one piece of fan fiction would use all strategies. He simply lists some strategies that fan writers use. Following Farley, I will show how some of the "same transformative moves" (2016, ¶ 1.3) described by Jenkins can also be found in *Ap. John*. I will investigate how contextual expectations and norms influence the use of these strategies. To be able to investigate how the rewriting in *Ap. John* is adapted to system requirements, we need to know something about the context of the work.

4. The where and when of *Ap. John*

[4.1] After being lost for centuries, *Ap. John* resurfaced when the manuscript Codex Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 (BG) was offered for sale on the antiquities market in Cairo in 1896. A series of unfortunate events delayed publication of the three so-called Gnostic apocrypha it contained until 1955 (Till 1955) ([note 3](#)). By then, three other manuscripts containing *Ap. John* had been found—Nag Hammadi Codex (NHC) II, III, and IV—in a discovery of twelve books containing mostly until then unknown apocrypha (Waldstein and Wisse 1995).

[4.2] *Ap. John* is often considered a second-century work. The Christian bishop Irenaeus of Lyons paraphrased a part of what now is the opening of the revelation in of *Ap. John* around the year 180 CE. The manuscripts containing *Ap. John* are, however, from the fourth or possibly fifth century CE; indeed, BG may even be from the sixth century (Krutzsch and Poethke 1984; Waldstein and Wisse 1995). There are different theories concerning the origin of the work, and a major debate has been whether the work originated in Christian circles (Pétrement 1990; Logan 1996) or whether there was a Jewish stage (Dahl 1978; Pearson 1976, 2004) of the work before the one we currently know (Creech 2017). However, *Ap. John* in its current form is Christian.

[4.3] Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott (2015) persuasively argue that the NHC, as well as the codex BG 8502, came from a monastic setting. The NHC's probable fourth-century date situates the texts in the foundational period of Egyptian monasticism, during a time of rapid Christian growth. It is during this century that Christianity went from being a minority to the majority religion of the Roman empire (Stark 1997; Depauw and Clarysse 2013). It is a time, too, of controversy over the understanding of Christ and of efforts to regulate canon. The first monastic leaders were not under a bishop's jurisdiction, and for a while their authority was independent of the church (Goehring 1986, 1997). This is the context in which we find *Ap. John* and its "interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction" (Jenkins 2012, 165) of Genesis.

[4.4] The late antique readers of the extant versions of *Ap. John* were thus situated in a monastic community, and it is therefore this community that is the closest analogy to a fandom. It is difficult to overstate the importance of a fan community to fan fiction: "Fanfiction is not just any continuation or interpretation of a story, but one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community" (Coppa 2017, 9). To Rachel Barenblat (2011), it is the community affiliation that makes a work transformative rather than just derivative.

[4.5] A fan fiction writer can presuppose canon literacy from the readers of fan fiction. In fact, the successful rewriting of canon depends on this. Reanalyzing the source material (rereading, rewatching) may be ritualized; fans' rereading of, commenting on, and exploration of canon is part of what makes a fandom a community. These practices immerse the fan in canon (Jenkins 2012). Kasper Bro Larsen (2019) holds that the hypertextual and social practices of fan fiction also describe the development of Christian apocrypha. In a monastic setting, the biblical texts rewritten and referred to in *Ap. John* would have been used in ritualized communal settings, such as liturgy. Lillian I. Larsen (2017, 2018) demonstrates how Bible texts were the basic pedagogical texts in monastic education. In reading *Ap. John* using the strategies of reading fan fiction, we can therefore presuppose a canon literacy in the readers of *Ap. John* similar to that of today's readers of fan fiction.

5. The story told in *Ap. John*

[5.1] *Ap. John's* story opens as the Apostle John comes to the temple in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Christ. There he has a run-in with a Pharisee, who claims that John has been misled. Upset by this, John leaves the temple for the wilderness. Christ appears to him and introduces him to secret teachings: the true account of the creation of the world (BG 19:6–22:17).

[5.2] The revelation that follows can be divided into two main parts: a description of the divine realms and a rewritten account of the creation and flood narratives from Genesis. *Ap. John* is a complicated read; the first part is particularly challenging and seems to have confused even the scribes copying it. The description of the divine world starts with the supreme God, called the Invisible Spirit, and it details how multiplicity could come into being from unity (BG 22:17–36:15). The original unity—the Spirit—reflected on itself. Its thought took on existence as an independent feminine divine entity, Barbelo. Numerous divine aspects, aeons, came into being at the request of Barbelo. During this process of divine emanations, Christ was born from Barbelo and the Spirit. These constitute *Ap. John's* version of the trinity—the Father (the Invisible Spirit), the Mother (Barbelo), and the Son (Christ) (BG 21:19–21, 29:18–32:19).

[5.3] Plato's *Timaeus* is an important intertext (King 2006; Pleše 2006). *Ap. John* presupposes a reality where everything below has a model above. The true world is the spiritual world, and the material world is a lesser imitation (BG 44:5–9). Because the world below is simply a (much) lesser copy of the world above, the creation narrative from Genesis is not only rewritten in the description of the creation of the material world but also informs the description of the world above (King 2006).

[5.4] In contrast to the creation narrative in Genesis, *Ap. John* holds that the supreme God and the creator of the world are not identical. Instead, the creation resulted from a "fall" in the divine world. The last aeon to emerge, Wisdom, wanted to imitate the Spirit's action—to produce something of her own. But younger, female aspects of the divine cannot do what the supreme God can do. Her wish takes on existence, but it is an inferior being. This inferior being, called Yaldabaoth, is thrown out of the divine realm. He then creates the heavens and the earth (BG 36:16–45:5).

[5.5] Even if Yaldabaoth is less than perfect, he does have divine power from his mother. This is a loss to the divine world. To retrieve this power, heavenly emissaries, in disguise as Yaldabaoth's own angels, fool him into creating man and to breathing the divine power into Adam. Human beings therefore have a spiritual element that belongs in the divine world. Jealous of Adam for having the power that used to be his, Yaldabaoth throws the man into matter, and the body, the emotions, and the sensations that having a body results in keep human beings ignorant (BG 45:6–55:13).

[5.6] To rectify this, Christ, as well as other divine figures, are sent to teach the human beings about their divine origin and how to ascend from and transcend the material world. The creation of woman is written as a salvific event, and eating of the Tree of Knowledge is interpreted as a moment when humanity learns the truth about its divine origin. However, Yaldabaoth and his servants strive to keep humans ignorant. They introduce sexuality and procreation, and they create a counterfeit spirit that can enter human beings. Humanity is therefore divided. Some humans have a divine spirit residing in them that strengthens their soul to make it able to resist temptation and ignorance; others have the counterfeit spirit, which leads them astray. However, toward the end of the revelation, Christ promises John that there will eventually be salvation for all, except for those who have learned the truth but abandoned it (BG 55:14–75:15).

[5.7] *Ap. John* ends with Christ telling John to write down the message he has been given and to share it with his "fellow spirits" (BG 75:15–77:5). How, then, is this a transformation of Genesis, and in which manner do Jenkins's strategies apply to the rewritten Genesis of *Ap. John*?

6. The opening scene: Recontextualization and genre shifting

[6.1] The book of Genesis opens with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The story goes on to tell how God, over the course of six days, does just that: creates heaven and earth and all living creatures. As his last act of creation, he creates humanity in his image. Although *Ap. John* offers a rewritten Genesis account, the opening scene is not from the very beginning of time but from the early first century CE. The scene is set somewhere in the time line of the New Testament Gospels or Acts. The setting (Jerusalem) and cast (a Pharisee, John, and Christ) are familiar, but this particular scene is not described in the New Testament. The New Testament gives little information about what Christ did between his resurrection and ascension, and even less about him after ascension.

[6.2] One mode of fan fiction describes events that happen in between canonical scenes. Jenkins (2012) calls this recontextualization, or missing scenes. These missing scenes can narrate situations only hinted at in canon; can function as explanations of unexpected developments evident in canon; or, not infrequently, can detail what happens between the fade to black and the morning thereafter. The opening narrative of *Ap. John* can be labeled a missing scene. Missing scenes give writers the option of being compliant to canon without "being totally restricted by the canon" (Pugh 2006, 36).

This concurrent freedom from and dependence on canon offers an option to add canonical legitimacy to venturing outside of canon in the revelation that follows the frame narrative. By giving Christ the role of revealer and by shifting the genre of the story of creation, the missing scene opens up possibilities for the rewriting of canonical material.

[6.3] Fan fiction is not limited by mode of presentation: a scene from a TV show may be transformed into a poem; a dramatic battle on screen may be described in detail in a letter. However, what Jenkins (2012) refers to when he discusses genre shifting is a shift from emphasis on plot to a focus on character relationships. Fan fiction does not have to be romantic, but it often is. The genre shifting in *Ap. John* does not turn the narrative into a love story. Instead, it is an attempt to strengthen the credibility of the rewriting of canon. By making this story a revelatory dialogue, *Ap. John* uses a strategy popular in early Christian writings for disclosing hidden meaning (Perkins 1980; Hartenstein 2000). This genre depends on passages in the Gospels that indicate that there were truths not told to all during Jesus's public preaching, but that Jesus, after his resurrection, chose to divulge to some. Among these passages is the Johannine Farewell Discourse (John 13:31–17:1). The Gospels and Acts also describe Jesus coming to his disciples to speak to them after his resurrection. In these, Jesus reveals the true meaning of the scriptures to some of his followers. Parkhouse (2019) draws attention to Luke 24, in which the risen Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27) (note 4). He later appears in Jerusalem, where "he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Therefore, when *Ap. John* uses the revelation dialogue genre, it is to utilize possibilities found in canon that authorize a reinterpretation of canon.

7. The conflict over authority

[7.1] Christian and Jewish tradition consider Moses to be the author of Genesis as well as the other books of the Torah. *Ap. John* does not question this, but it does challenge Moses's authority. In fact, Christ explicitly "corrects" the Genesis text with the phrase "(it is) not as Moses said" (or similar) four times in *Ap. John* (note 5). Though *Ap. John* goes much further in correcting Moses than the New Testament Gospels do, the idea that Christ has an authority above Moses is found there as well. The quote from Luke 24 is one example, but there are also other examples in the Gospels of Jesus correcting or expanding on scriptural traditions (Matthew 5–7; Mark 10:6–9). It is this canonically established idea of Christ's authority surpassing that of Moses that *Ap. John* relies on when Christ reinterprets Genesis for John:

[7.2] I said: Lord, what is "the trance"?

He laughed and said, "Do you think it is as Moses said it, 'He made him sleep?'"

No, it was his perception he veiled with a lack of perception. For indeed, he said through the prophet, "I will make the ears of their hearts heavy so [that] they will not understand and will not see." (NHC III 29:2–11)

[7.3] The corrections challenge the Genesis narrative as well as the doctrines of the emerging Christian orthodoxy, but the canonicity of Genesis is not challenged. Although the creation narrative on the literal level does not convey the full truth, Christ introduces a spiritual or higher meaning hidden in the words of Moses that are not immediately accessible to readers without the help of his revelation. In the corrections, John asks for an explanation of a word or a phrase, and Christ gives him an allegorical interpretation (Dunderberg 2011; Rosland, forthcoming).

8. Out of character?

[8.1] Despite not challenging the canonicity of Genesis, the interpretation of Genesis in *Ap. John*

opposes the belief that God created heaven and earth. *Ap. John* describes one supreme God who is not the creator and a creator who is not God. Fan fiction fails when readers do not accept canon characters as being in character. What is done in *Ap. John* to keep God in character?

[8.2] One way God is kept in character is by *Ap. John's* doing what Jenkins (2012) calls expanding the time line. Such expansion can involve writing a story that takes place before the opening of the series to give background to characters or events, or it can be a continuation of the canon, set between TV seasons or when the TV show has come to an end. Genesis starts at creation. *Ap. John* starts before creation, with a description of the emanation of different aspects of God. There is a trinity of sorts, but this trinity is Father, Mother, and Son. There are several female aspects of God. The emergence of Christ is described differently in the different versions of *Ap. John*. This variation perhaps indicates that its contemporaneous readers had problems with aligning the image of Christ in *Ap. John* with the one they knew from other Christian writings.

[8.3] A solution to this problem may be found in *Ap. John's* opening scene. When Christ appears, it is as a likeness with many forms, saying, "John, John why [do you] wonder and why [do you] fear? [You] are not a stranger to this likeness. Do not be faint hearted—I am the one who [is with you] always. I am [the Father. I am] the Mother. I am the So[n]" (BG 21:14–21). The declaration "I am the one who is with you always" alludes to Matthew 28 and the trinitarian baptism formula found there. By this, Christ reveals that John does in fact know him, even if he may appear in unrecognizable forms. Again, the opening scene of *Ap. John* gives the reader interpretive keys. The expansion of the time line offers a different understanding of God than the one known from both Genesis and the Gospels. However, the allusion offers the reader the option of seeing this not as a competing understanding of God but rather as a complementary or higher understanding.

9. Moral realignment

[9.1] It is not only the description of the supreme God that may be read as out of character. In *Ap. John's* version of the story, the creator is the villain. Applying Jenkins's (2012) vocabulary, this can be described as moral realignment. This is typically done by narrating the rewritten story from the point of view of the villain of the source text to "invert or question the moral universe of the primary text" (168). In *Ap. John*, the creator is recast as the villain.

[9.2] The creator (Yaldabaoth in *Ap. John*) is given a backstory not known from the Bible. In it, he is a faulty character since his conception. His mother, Wisdom, wanted to produce something from herself, like the Invisible Spirit did when his Thought (Barbelo) emerged and became a new entity. However, this was without the contribution of her partner and not according to God's plan (BG 36:16–38:6). The description of the conception and birth of Yaldabaoth follows the medical understanding of its time. A child born without a father would lack form and perfection (Smith 2000). Wisdom's son is an evil and arrogant son, but he still has divine power. The rest of *Ap. John* details how humanity is created in an effort to retrieve that power, and how Yaldabaoth and his minions fight to keep humanity trapped in ignorance while Christ and other divine emissaries come to the aid of the human beings.

[9.3] As moral alignments go, *Ap. John* went for what was perhaps the boldest option: making the god of Genesis evil. How is he, then, kept in character? Yaldabaoth is kept in character by speaking words recognizable to readers familiar with Jewish scripture as the creator god's words. When Yaldabaoth watches his creation, he proclaims, "I am a jealous god. Without me there is no one" (BG 44:14–15). This statement sounds like a biblical quotation, although this exact sentence is not found in the Bible. It is, however, a paraphrase of related ideas, a blend of several passages in which the creator demands exclusive worship and claims to be the only god.

[9.4] In Isaiah, creation and the demand of exclusivity are found together. One example occurs in Isaiah 45:18: "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth

and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other."

[9.5] When Yaldabaoth utters his assertion of being the only god as he looks out over all his creation, it is precisely because creation and exclusivity are connected in the Jewish scriptures. In the proclamation in *Ap. John*, the claim of exclusivity is paired with a statement of being a jealous god. Statements of jealousy are found in several places in the Hebrew Bible, including Exodus 20:5 and 34:14 and Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9, and 6:15. In the Ten Commandments, the statement is accompanied by the idea of God punishing children for the transgressions of their fathers:

[9.6] For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5–6)

[9.7] Not all would find a jealous god good, and certainly not one who threatens to punish the children for the sins of the fathers. By letting Yaldabaoth speak in words taken from canon, he is still recognizable, despite the moral realignment. By alluding to canonical passages where the creator god claims to be jealous, the reader is encouraged to find him evil. In *Ap. John*, Yaldabaoth is repeatedly shown to be vengeful toward human beings when they do not do as he pleases. In this manner, canon is actively used to subvert the Genesis narrative to support the rewriting of Yaldabaoth as the antagonist of the story.

10. Conclusion

[10.1] By using the list of strategies outlined in Jenkins (2012) as an analytical tool, it is evident that *Ap. John* uses some of the same techniques that today's fan fiction does. Recontextualization, genre shifting, expanding the time line, and moral realignment are all used as transformative strategies contributing to the rewriting of the first chapters of Genesis. In Farley's words, *Ap. John* "makes the same transformative moves" modern fan fiction does (2016, ¶ 1.3). The analysis also shows that the ways these transformations are legitimized are determined by *Ap. John*'s historical context.

[10.2] *Ap. John* must, in contrast to fan fiction, establish its right to be transformative. Two of the strategies, recontextualization and genre shifting, facilitate the rewriting by appealing to the highest authority for scriptural interpretation in Christianity established in canon: Christ. Extension of the time line and moral realignment introduce understandings of the main characters, Christ and the creator, that challenge and contradict canon. To support this rewriting, *Ap. John* appeals to canon by allusions and quotes. While subverting canon through strategies also used in fan fiction, *Ap. John* repeatedly utilizes its authoritative texts. As much as it rewrites canon, it simultaneously reaffirms canon's authoritative status.

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12. Notes

1. The English translation by J. N. D. Kelly (2006, 297) is based on Guiseppe Luigi Dosetti's *Il simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli* (1967).
2. This quote is from the manuscript Codex Berolinensis 8502,2 44:9–19 (BG). For consistency, references to *Ap. John* will be from this manuscript, unless I compare different versions of the work or the text in BG is missing or too fragmented to use. The references to *Ap. John* indicate codex, page number, and line number. Holes in the manuscripts are indicated by square brackets. Letters or words inside such brackets are reconstructions. All translations from Coptic are my own.
3. Till published the Acts of Peter found in the manuscript in 1903. The publication of *Ap. John*, The Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Mary were, however, hindered by two world wars and a flooding of the publication house. By Till's own classifications, these are Gnostic works. I avoid the term *Gnostic Gnosticism* even though *Ap. John* very often has been labeled as such, even called "the Gnostic Bible *par excellence*" (Tardieu 1984, 26). Williams (1996) demonstrates that Gnosticism is a modern construct. The term neither corresponds to the self-definitions of the groups often labeled Gnostic nor works well as a typological construct. King (2003) shows how the term has functioned as a rhetorical device, supplying the heretical other against which orthodoxy can be defined. Gnosticism is therefore not only ill suited as a definition but also tainted with connotations that impede textual understanding.
4. The English translations of Bible texts are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (<https://www.bible.com/>), with the exception of Genesis 1:1. NRSV reads, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." The (common) translation I have used is, however, suggested as an alternative.
5. "Are you thinking it is as Moses said it 'above the waters'? No" (BG 45:8–10). "It is not as Moses said it: 'He put him to sleep'" (BG 56:16–18), "not as Moses said 'his rib'" (BG 59:17–19). It is not as Moses said, "They hid themselves in an ark" (BG 73:4–6).

13. References

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