

# 1. Commission, Conversion, and Biography

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This chapter will look at narrative, rhetorical, and theoretical texts from antiquity, in order to approach the phenomenon of divine commission<sup>1</sup>. We will also discuss the concept of conversion, commission, and biography, as well as the hermeneutical difficulties related to the form and function of commission stories.

## **‘As God Counseled Socrates’: Stories of Divine Call**

In Plato’s *Apology* Socrates first refutes some false accusations, and then raises the question whence prejudice has arisen against him. To answer that problem he tells the story of the ‘Chaerephon oracle’<sup>2</sup>: Socrates’ friend Chaerephon went to Delphi and asked the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. Pythia replied that there was none. When Socrates heard the oracle, he began to ponder ‘what does the god mean’ (21b3). As he did not understand, ‘he set himself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it’ (21b7–8). Socrates ‘went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom’ (21b9) in order to refute the prophecy, but he realised that he was not wise at all. Thus, since he ‘was trying to find out the

1. We will deal mainly with Greco-Roman culture, a context that was hitherto neglected in the discussion of commission narratives. For the moment, a handful of texts will suffice to sketch the basic concepts. Several additional examples (Near Eastern, Jewish, and Greco-Roman) will be studied in the next chapter.

2. Plato, *Apology* 20d–21b, trans. H. Tredennick in Hamilton and Cairns (eds), *Plato*, adapted. Xenophon, *Apology* 14, also reports the oracle.

meaning of the oracle', he 'was bound to interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge'<sup>3</sup>.

The Chaerephon oracle constitutes a recurring theme of Socrates' first defence. He seeks in Athens someone wiser than himself, but he fails. Finally, 'Socrates understands that Apollo has entrusted him with a mission'<sup>4</sup>:

But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless'. That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs. In fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty. (23a5–c1)

Towards the conclusion of the first defence speech, Socrates affirms once again:

This duty I have accepted, as I said, in obedience to God's commands given in oracles and dreams and in every other way that any other divine dispensation has ever impressed a duty upon man. (33c)

The episode which Plato reports here is the commission story of Socrates. It tells how Socrates became a philosopher, or more precisely, how he began his public activity as a philosopher in Athens. The god used the Chaerephon oracle to commission him to converse with the people of Athens and look for a wise man among them. This was also commanded to Socrates by the god in (other) oracles and dreams<sup>5</sup>, which he calls the usual way for gods to commission people. He says he dedicated himself fully to his god-given task, and had hardly any time to intermingle with politics or to seek his own benefit. The Soc-

3. Plato, *Apology* 21e4–22a1: ἰτέον [...] ἐπὶ ἅπαντας τοὺς τι δοκοῦντας εἰδέναι. Cf. Paul's visiting the reputed ones (δοκοῦντες εἶναι τι) of the Jerusalem church (*Galatians* 2.6).

4. De Strycker and Slings, *Apology*, 22.

5. Cf. *Phaedo* 60e4–61a4; De Strycker and Slings, *Apology*, 82.

rates of the *Apology* has a message that ‘the god had given him for humankind’<sup>6</sup>. Within the plot of the book, the purpose of telling his commission story is to defend himself against the accusations of Meletus before the jury of the Athenians. On the referential level, Plato may have intended to defend Socrates’ public activity before his readership. In the rhetorical structure of the *Apology*, the *narratio* of the Chaerephon oracle supports affirmative arguments for the *refutatio* (refutation of opposing views) in the first speech<sup>7</sup>.

In *Acts*, we find a similar literary use of a commission narrative. Paul’s story of the Damascus road is probably *the* conversion story in biblical literature. Since its detailed discussion follows later in this book, I will not paraphrase the episode here. We have to notice, however, that the three versions which Luke offers (*Acts* 9, 22, 26), are considerably different from each other. Twice Luke lets Paul himself talk about his experience on the Damascus road in the frame of apologies: first before the Jerusalem crowd (ch. 22) and then before the proconsul Festus and King Agrippa (ch. 26)<sup>8</sup>. The word ‘apology’ occurs eight times (as a noun or a verb) in chapters 22–6<sup>9</sup>. In comparison to Plato’s work, one could call these chapters in *Acts* the Lucan *apologia Pauli*. This apology of Paul contains three defence speeches<sup>10</sup>, in two of which Paul relates his commission story. In the rhetorical framework of these speeches, the *narratio* of the Damascus road serves as the most important argument<sup>11</sup>.

Let us point out the most important similarities between the two texts. Both Plato and Luke composed three defence speeches for their heroes. In one or more of these speeches, the hero relates the story of his divine commission. The commission episode is a key feature in drawing the portrait of the hero. In the rhetorical structure it serves as a *narratio* of the speech and also immediately constitutes an important element of the proof. When telling their stories of divine commission, both Socrates and Paul shift responsibility for their deeds upon

6. Stokes, *Apology*, 115.

7. Cf. De Strycker and Slings, *Apology*, 22; also p. 72, note 45 below.

8. The word ἀπολογία is used in *Acts* 22.1, ἀπολογέω in 26.1.

9. Cf. p. 69, note 31 below.

10. *Acts* 22.3–21, 24.10–21, 26.2–29.

11. Cf. pp. 69–86 below.

God, a rhetorical technique nicely called *metastasis* by G. Kennedy<sup>12</sup>. Socrates offers ‘the god of Delphi’ as the witness of his wisdom, and Chaerephon’s brother—since Chaerephon himself is dead—of his commission. Paul names as his witnesses—though not directly to his Damascus experience—the high priest, the elders, and ‘all the Jews’<sup>13</sup>. Like Socrates, Paul talks about God’s command to him: ‘Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned (commanded) to you to do’<sup>14</sup>. Similarly to Socrates’ total devotion, Paul claims he ‘was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’. Or, as he earlier stated to the Ephesian elders: ‘I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus’<sup>15</sup>.

There are further important motifs in common to be mentioned. The heroes’ missions will occupy them for the rest of their lives. The task to be performed is initially unclear and the hero reluctant. Paul ‘kicks against the goads’, goes to Damascus, and sits there blind among fasting and prayers, not knowing what will happen to him.<sup>16</sup> Socrates uses the typical topos of protest: ‘I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small’. He is ‘for a long time at a loss’ what the oracle means, and then he proceeds ‘with considerable reluctance’. Finally, there is an important secondary character in both stories. Chaerephon in Socrates’ and Ananias in Paul’s commission mediate between deity and hero.

### The Concept of Commission

Our observations about the two texts render it indispensable to look for a hermeneutical framework in which their similarities can be explained. In New Testament scholarship a usual way to interpret commission stories has been to compare them to Old Testament parallels. The concept of a ‘commission form’ has been established and applied

12. Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 134.

13. *Apology* 21a; *Acts* 22.5 (twice), 26.5; note also *Acts* 20.23, ‘the Holy Spirit testifies to me’.

14. *Acts* 22.10. Luke’s wording (τέτακται σοι ποιῆσαι) is very close to Plato’s (ἔμοι δὲ τοῦτο [...] προστέτακται ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ πραττεῖν) in *Apology* 33c4–5.

15. *Acts* 26.19 and 20.24, respectively.

16. *Acts* 26.14 and 9.9.

to Old and New Testament texts<sup>17</sup>, and Paul's conversion itself has been interpreted as a prophetic call<sup>18</sup>. Did a comparable concept of divine commission exist in the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, and more closely, in the first century AD?

First, let us consider whether we are correct in quoting Greco-Roman stories about philosophers as parallels to early Christian apostolic stories. Are conversion and call to philosophy appropriate parallels to the *religious* conversion and commission of the early Christian heroes? The structural and functional similarities between the stories of Socrates and Paul that we have highlighted above suggest that the comparison of such texts is a workable alternative<sup>19</sup>. While conversion and commission episodes in Jewish and Christian texts focus the goals and horizons of human life into a central biographical episode, these human goals and perspectives are also major concerns of eudaemonistic philosophies<sup>20</sup>.

According to A.D. Nock, 'in ancient paganism [...] philosophy [...] held a clear concept of two types of life, a higher and a lower, and [...] exhorted men to turn from the one to the other'. Whereas for Nock, it is the *moral claim* of philosophy that makes it comparable to biblical religion(s), we have to point out—while maintaining his truth—the deeper lying similarities of conversion and call in the two ideological systems. When stressing the motif of 'conversion' in the texts—and this was the subject of Nock's study—the moral implications are pushed into the foreground. When—often using the very same texts—we talk about 'call' or 'commission', the *existential perspectives* receive the main emphasis. Whereas conversion results in a nobler and godlier conduct, a commission story sets up a new framework for human life, with a task to be fulfilled in the centre. It is the narrative, biographical role of commission that we will examine in our study.

The religious affinity of late Stoic philosophy is well-known. A survey of a chapter by Epictetus (*c.* 55–*c.* 135) will illuminate the

17. See p. 1, notes 2–3 above.

18. See p. 2, note 6 above.

19. Droge, 'Call Stories' and 'Call Stories (Gospels)' argued for the similarity of the philosopher's call and the call stories of the Gospels (cf. pp. 54–50 below).

20. Cf. Nock, *Conversion*, 14.

idea of divine commission in the Greco-Roman world in New Testament times. While also discussing the task of philosophers in many other passages of his writings, Epictetus dedicates a full chapter in his *Discourses* to the ‘call of the Cynic’. Instructing one of his acquaintances who has an inclination to take up the calling of a Cynic, he tells the following parable:

[T]he man who lays his hand to so great a matter as this without God, is hateful to Him, and his wish means nothing else than disgracing himself in public. For in a well ordered house no one comes along and says to himself, ‘I ought to be manager of this house’; or if he does, the lord of the mansion, when he turns around and sees the fellow giving orders in a high and mighty fashion, drags him out and gives him a dressing down. So it goes also in this great city, the world; for here also there is a Lord of the Mansion who assigns each and every thing its place<sup>21</sup>.

The true Cynic has to know, Epictetus argues, that he is sent by Zeus to the people as a messenger to show them that they have gone astray, and as a scout to find out what things are friendly to men and what are hostile<sup>22</sup>. The Cynic has to be prepared to endure sufferings<sup>23</sup>. ‘[K]now yourself, ask the Deity, do not attempt the task without God. For if God advises you, be assured that he wishes you either to become great, or to receive many stripes’. The Cynic should take the trials like Diogenes, taking pride in his distress rather than blaming God for it. Moreover, he must love those who flog him ‘as though he were the father or brother of them all’. The attitude which Epictetus prescribes here reminds us of a number of New Testament passages<sup>24</sup>, and is perfectly fulfilled by Paul, at least as he writes about his ministry in his epistles, ‘boasting’ and ‘rejoicing’ in his sufferings<sup>25</sup>. In the

21. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.2–5. This passage sounds almost like an apocryphal logion of Jesus, cf. especially *Mark* 12.1–9; *Matthew* 24.45–51, 25.14–30.

22. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.23.

23. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.53–58.

24. See especially *Matthew* 5.38–48; *James* 1.1–2.

25. *2 Corinthians* 11.16–33; *Colossians* 1.24. For Paul’s epistles and stoic philosophy, see recently Malherbe, *Paul* and Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul*.

*Acts of the Apostles* Luke portrays Peter and John as receiving their sufferings as a confirmation of their divine commission<sup>26</sup>.

Epictetus is also fond of the picture of the Olympic games<sup>27</sup>. The Cynic participates in an Olympic contest, he says, and not in some other miserable or cheap one. Using Diogenes as an example, he also connects the metaphor of the Olympic games to endurance in trials<sup>28</sup>. In a previous chapter he compares preparation for philosophy to ambitions of Olympic victory<sup>29</sup>. In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul also speaks about two different contests: athletes exercise for the perishable wreath, while Christians for the imperishable one<sup>30</sup>. As for his own ministry, he writes: ‘I am running toward the goal *for the prize of the upward calling of God* in Christ Jesus’<sup>31</sup>.

Freedom, heavenly citizenship, poverty, the welcoming of death, and many other *topoi* of Epictetus and Paul could be set up side by side. Almost every sentence of Epictetus’ exhortation evokes a passage from the Pauline corpus<sup>32</sup>. For the time being, however, we are concerned with commission in the apostolic Acts. We can find that one of Paul’s speeches in *Acts*, namely his farewell to the Ephesian elders in Miletus, mirrors exactly Epictetus’ teaching on the Cynic’s call<sup>33</sup>:

26. *Acts* 5.41.

27. This was one of the favourite metaphors in Cynic and Stoic philosophy, cf. Pfitzner, *Agon Motif*, 28–35.

28. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.51–2, 58–9.

29. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.15.

30. *1 Corinthians* 9.24–7.

31. *Philippians* 3.14 (NRSV, adapted): κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Cf. *2 Timothy* 4.7–8.

32. The Byzantine scholiast Arethas (c. 850–c. 940) suggested that Epictetus read the New Testament (Schenkl, *Epictetus*, xv).

33. In the chart below, I added a passage from *Discourses* 2.3 in row (c) and from 2.20 in row (d).

**Miletus speech***(Acts 20)*

You yourselves know how I lived *among you the entire time* [...] *serv- ing the Lord* with all humility

among tears and trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews (18–9).

I did not shrink from [...] proclaiming the message to you (*ἀναγγεῖλαι*), and teaching you publicly and from house to house (20). I did not shrink from declaring (*ἀναγγεῖλαι*) to you the whole purpose of God (27).

I testified about [...] *repentance to- ward God* and faith toward our Lord Jesus (21).

And now, *as a captive to the spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem*, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testi- fies to me in every city that *imprison- ment and persecutions* are waiting for me (22–3).

But I do not count my life of any value to myself,

if only I may finish *my course*. (24)

I coveted *no one's silver or gold* or clothing (33).

*Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his Son (28).

**The call of a Cynic***(Discourses 3.22.1–109)*

The Cynic ought to be free from dis- traction, *wholly devoted to the service of God, free to go about among men* (69).

He must be flogged like an ass, and while he is being flogged he must love the men who flog him (54).

He has been sent by Zeus to men as a messenger (*ἄγγελος*) (23). To show to the individual, as well as to the crowd, the warring inconsistency in which they are floundering about (2.3.23).

Our citizens *may be converted and may honour the Divine* (2.20.22).

*Exile? And to what can anyone thrust me out?* Outside the universe he can- not. But wherever I go, there are sun, moon, stars, dreams, omens, my con- verse with gods (22).

My paltry body is nothing to me. [...] Death? Let it come when it will (21).

Man, it's an *Olympic contest* in which you are intending to enter your name, not some cheap and miserable contest (51).

I am [...] without property. [I have] only earth, and sky, and one rough cloak (47). [It does not fit a Cynic] to devour or *put away what people give him* (50).

The Cynic has made all mankind his children; the men are his sons, the women are his daughters. And in this spirit *he approaches them all and ca- res for them all*. [...] It is as a father he does it, as a brother, and *as a ser- vant of Zeus, who is father of us all*.

The chart could be completed from other passages by Epictetus, and a third column could be added for the Pauline epistles. Further parallels can be found in great number in Dio Chrysostomos and other philosophers<sup>34</sup>. The main interest of this comparison, however, lies in the fact that here Epictetus' specific and coherent presentation of the philosopher's divine call is compared to a confession of the Lucan Paul about his ministry, and surprising agreements are found between the two.

We can identify the following common topoi in the two texts: (a) full dedication of one's life to the service of the deity among people; (b) endurance in trials<sup>35</sup>; (c) being a messenger of God showing his purpose to the people; (d) urging people to convert; (e) wandering from place to place, not fearing the persecutions; (f) not caring even for one's own life; (g) running toward the goal (like in an Olympic contest); (h) expecting no payment for one's ministry; and (i) caring for people as a father or shepherd.

As for the last topos, the picture of the shepherd is used also by Epictetus, but it does not designate so much the task of the Cynic, as rather the responsible leader's worries about his people, like the concerns of Homer's Agamemnon: 'For you wail as the shepherds do when a wolf carries off one of their sheep; and these men over whom you rule are sheep'<sup>36</sup>. Further, in *Acts* the image of the shepherd refers to the office of the Ephesian elders rather than to that of Paul. Finally, the Ephesian elders are appointed as overseers by the Holy Spirit, whereas the fatherhood of the Cynic is rather an imitation of God's acting as a father.

There are also differences between the literary settings of the two texts. Epictetus' passage is part of a lengthy series of more or less consistent philosophical discussions. Paul's farewell is a rhetorical composition by Luke at an important point of his historical narrative.

34. Malherbe, *Paul*, 152–4, identifies typical 'Greco-Roman elements' in the Miletus speech; from Epictetus he quotes *Discourses* 3.23.33–4.

35. Epictetus warns here to the love of one's persecutors, which is also a Christian topos (cf. *Matthew* 5.44), but missing from the Miletus speech.

36. Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.35–36, cf. 3.22.92. Also Paul talks about wolves watching for the flock (*Acts* 20.29; cf. *Matthew* 7.15; *John* 10.12). Malherbe, *Paul*, 153, calls the depiction of the false teachers as wolves a stereotype; cf. Lucian, *Fisherman* 35–36.

It is all the more remarkable that Paul's confession evokes the pattern of divine commission as depicted by Epictetus, and that Luke finds these thoughts an appropriate conclusion of Paul's journeys in Asia Minor and Greece.

### **The Narrative Context: Biography**

Both Plato's *Apology* and Luke's *Acts* are biographical narratives<sup>37</sup>. In both texts, it is divine commission that defines the personality of the protagonist. Whatever is told about their characters and deeds is subordinate to and dependent on the call stories. In this way, the commission narrative becomes a literary device to create characters, and it functions as a core element of biographical narratives. The apostolic Acts studied in this book are also biographical narratives, because they present the public careers of their heroes<sup>38</sup>. Some of them give a narrative from birth to death, while others concentrate on a certain period of the protagonist's life. In the rest of the book I hope to show that commission stories play a similar central role in the apostolic Acts, as has been shown in the *Apology* or *Acts*.

Let us consider the biographical function of commission stories in a broader framework for a moment. Commission seems to play a central role in human life (βίος) reconstructed as a biographical narrative. Commission stories are aetiological: in a narrative form, they give the reason of one's being who and what one is. They define the main themes of one's biography. Even in a non-explicitly theistic frame of thought, stories about people's 'call' or 'mission' play a central role in creating and maintaining the organised self. The 'sender' function can be attributed to different personal or non-personal factors. When viewed from the perspective of a life-story, these ideas are obviously of religious nature.

37. Dihle, *Biographie*, 18, considered *Apology* as the first Greek biography. Cox, *Biography*, 7, affirms that 'The apologies produced after Socrates' death by Plato and Xenophon, while not biographies in flower, contain elements that became standard features of later biographical portraits'. For *Acts*, cf. p. 6, note 21 above.

38. For our concept of biography, see p. 6 above.

In modernity, the idea of divine call is echoed in the concept of ‘vocation’. As Max Weber put it:

Now it is unmistakable that even in the German word *Beruf*, and perhaps still more clearly in the English *calling*, a religious conception, that of a task set by God, is at least suggested<sup>39</sup>.

Weber takes this concept as unique to the Protestant thought beginning with Luther’s Bible translation. He claims that there are neither Greek nor Roman equivalents of the idea<sup>40</sup>. ‘Neither the predominantly Catholic peoples,’ Weber suggests, ‘nor those of classical antiquity have possessed any expression of similar connotation for what we know as a calling—in the sense of a life-task, a definite field in which to work’. He concludes, ‘like the meaning of the word, the idea is new, a product of the Reformation. [...] But at least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume’. In fact, the texts hitherto quoted suggest that there is something more to say about that subject. The narrative patterns that we will examine in the apostolic commission narratives and their ancient literary parallels hopefully also provide a better understanding of the modern notions of *calling*.

Let us turn our attention again to our ancient passages. The apologies of Socrates and Paul are separated by five centuries in time. It is difficult to answer how tradition came down from Plato to Luke, and perhaps it is not the most important question to ask. If we work solely with an idea of traditions descending linearly in time, this may lead to false conclusions. Let us be reminded of the three levels of interpretation (anthropological, cultural, historical) as suggested in the Introduction<sup>41</sup>. Commission stories have intertextual relations with their specific social and historical settings, their cultural context, and long lasting anthropological structures. Our discussion of commission

39. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 79.

40. In a lengthy note, *Protestant Ethic*, 204–5, Weber examines the meaning of the Greek expressions ἔργον, πόνος, τὰ προσήκοντα, and τάξις as well as the Latin *opus*, *officium*, *munus*, *professio*, and *ars*, and also the biblical usage, and concludes that none of them has the ethical and religious implications that *Beruf* and *calling* do.

41. See pp. 3f above.

extends to all three levels, because culture is available only through its historical manifestations, and anthropological phenomena can be detected only in their various cultural forms. In some cases, we can find a concrete historical *Sitz im Leben* for the texts. At other times, we have to satisfy ourselves with situating the text in a more general cultural environment. Anthropological structures perhaps play a role more often than we assume. The pattern of commission probably overarches all the three levels. Stories of divine call, as we will see in the following chapter, are detectable in the larger cultural environment of Early Christianity. The form in which they appeared in a given literary tradition was certainly determined by actual historical circumstances, which elicited specific human needs and concerns. Yet the appearance of the model in all of these literatures, as well as in extremely different cultural traditions<sup>42</sup>, suggests that anthropological factors may be equally important for the understanding of the phenomenon. In this book, we will limit ourselves to the cultural environment of early Christian literature. We will also attempt to establish the sujet of commission and describe the models of self-identification reflected by these texts<sup>43</sup>. These observations may serve as points of departure for the understanding of the form and function of commission in other ages and different cultures.

Returning to commission in the context of ancient literature, as exemplified up to this point by our textual evidence, let us give a phenomenological description of the commission narrative:

- A. A commission narrative is found in a biographical framework. It summarises and defines the main topoi of biography.
- B. A commission story tells how a deity (as the ‘sender’<sup>44</sup>) commands a (usually human) hero to perform a task.
- C. The commission is given through a vision, oracle, or dream, one of the ‘usual ways’ of communication between god and man, as Plato’s Socrates put it.

42. For example, Goodman, ‘Visions’; Lang et al., ‘Dreams and Sleep’.

43. See Chapters 10 and 11 below.

44. When we talk about ‘sender’ and ‘helper’ (below), we use the terminology of A.-J. Greimas, on whose theory more will be said on pp. 215f below.

- D. We can discern the importance of a secondary character, the ‘helper’. Chaerephon in Socrates’ and Ananias in Paul’s commission mediate between the deity (‘sender’) and the hero.
- E. The hero has to perform a task in (or for) the public. The mission will occupy him for the rest of his life<sup>45</sup>.
- F. The episode redefines the relation of the sender and the hero. The hero becomes the agent of the sender.
- G. The task is not clear at the first instance, and/or the hero is reluctant. Ambiguity keeps Paul sitting in Damascus among fasting and prayers, and forces Socrates to dialogue in Athens.
- H. The hero dedicates himself totally to the mission and neglects his own benefit. In the end he might pay with his life.

Our description is intended to be more dynamic than the ones used in previous scholarship. We want to underline the functional rather than the formal characteristics of commission. What we try to identify is a system of narrative-textual strategies rather than a form or a genre. The aspects outlined here are by no means rigid rules that necessarily apply to all commission narratives. They provide, nevertheless, an initial set of criteria for the examination of commission passages.

### **Commission Narratives in the Apostolic Acts**

With these observations in mind, we can preliminarily draw the circle of apostolic commission narratives to be studied in the subsequent chapters. First of all, we have to realise how difficult it is to define the genre ‘Acts’ and the circle of texts belonging to that genre<sup>46</sup>. As a point of departure, we will regard as apostolic Acts the texts to which either ancient or modern tradition attached that label. Most of the apostolic Acts are biographical, describing the deeds of the hero and often concluding with his death. The biographical framework is, nev-

45. Accordingly, our concept of commission narratives excludes episodes like Jesus’ commanding Peter to walk on the sea (*Matthew* 14.29). Mullins, ‘Commission Forms’, 605, takes up this and similar stories into his charts.

46. To my knowledge, no attempt has been made yet to settle this issue. For the problems related to the term ‘acts’ see Mortley, ‘The Title of Acts’; Hilhorst, ‘Apocryphal Acts’, 1–2; for a general discussion see Schneemelcher, ‘Second and Third Century Acts’, and Schäferdiek, ‘Manichean Collection’.

ertheless, not rigidly followed by all of them: while most of them report the death of the apostle, only the *Acts of Titus*—the latest of the texts we will discuss—mentions the lineage of the hero. Further, the fragmentary nature of the extant texts often makes it difficult to reconstruct the plot of the narrative. The beginning of the *Acts of Paul*, the *Acts of Peter*, and the *Acts of John* seems to be lost altogether.

The Lucan *Acts* provides a relatively simple case: the commission of Paul is told three times, and much of the book presents his deeds. His death, however, is not reported. In the extant parts of the *Acts of Paul*, in contrast, we do not find the commission narrative of the hero. Nevertheless, there is an unpublished Coptic papyrus in the Bodmer Library that probably belonged to these Acts, in which Paul gives a brief report of his commission. The *Acts of John* relates the commission of the hero in three different passages. In the *Acts of Peter* 5, Jesus appears to Peter in a vision and commands him to go to Rome<sup>47</sup>:

Peter, the man Simon whom you expelled from Judea, proving him a sorcerer, has again forestalled you (pl.) at Rome. In short, you must know that Satan is cunning and his power has perverted all those who believed in me; and (in this way Simon) proves himself his agent. But do not delay; set out tomorrow (for Caesarea), and there you will find a ship ready which is sailing to Italy. And in a few days I will show you my grace which has no bounds.

On the one hand, this passage shows some features common with commission narratives: it contains a vision, and the deity endows the hero with a task. The mission to Rome will lead ultimately to the martyrdom of Peter. On the other hand, the vision itself claims that the task to be performed is the continuation of a previous mission<sup>48</sup>. There is no interaction (dialogue) between the sender and the hero as in most commission narratives, and the episode does not change the relation of the sender and the hero. Therefore, we will not include this passage in the detailed discussion of apostolic commission narratives.

47. Text in Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum*, vol 1, 49, lines 24–31, trans. Schneemelcher, ‘Acts of Peter’, 290–1.

48. This is probably also true of *Acts of John* 18, which, however, definitely fits into our paradigm when viewed in the context of the other two commission passages (chs. 88–9 and 113) of the book.

We can find, however, some more ‘Acts’ that deal with Peter among the Nag Hammadi texts. One of them, the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* (NHC VI, 1), narrates the commission of Peter and the other apostles—Peter and John being the real protagonists of the story. The text does not present actual ‘acts’ performed by the apostles, but describes a mysterious journey which serves as a preparation for their ministry.

The *Acts of Thomas* begins with Thomas’ commission to India. It relates the apostle’s protest and how thereupon Jesus sells him as a slave. Although Thomas appears as an apostle from the beginning of the book, the first chapters not only set a new task before him, but also substantially redefine his relation to Jesus. The commission of Thomas begins with the division of the lands among the apostles, a motif that appears in several other texts. Among others, it is related in the *Martyrium prius* of Andrew, the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, and the *Acts of John by Pseudo-Prochorus*. I will discuss these episodes in Chapter 10.

From the Acts of the fourth and fifth centuries, I have selected three texts which contain interesting commission episodes: the *Acts of Philip*, the *Acts of Barnabas*, and the *Acts of Titus*. In all of the three writings, the relation of the hero to the sender as well as to the social institutions receives much attention. Whereas it is possible that some examples escaped my attention (the discussion necessarily remains selective especially in case of the numerous later Acts)<sup>49</sup>, the texts studied below surely represent the main variations and important features of apostolic commission in the canonical and apocryphal Acts. However, before analysing our major passages one by one, we have to consider commission in a larger area of ancient literature. In the next chapter, we will survey a number of commission stories in different literary traditions, in order to gain a perspective for the study of apostolic commission narratives.

49. De Santos Otero, ‘Later Acts’, enumerates forty different texts, many of them known in several versions and recensions.