The name Acts of Paul is given to a body of literature containing a number of different narrative episodes about Paul and his exploits, found in some free-floating manuscripts and two collections in Greek (P. Hamburg, 4th c.) and in Coptic (P. Heidelberg, 6th c.). Previous scholarship has tended toward treating the Acts as an abstract whole, produced in Asia Minor sometime in the second century, of which the extant manuscript evidence represents only parts. Along with this assumption, scholars have paired inquiry into the literary relationship between the Acts of Paul and the canonical Acts of the Apostles, often privileging the canonical text as base from which the apocryphal texts diverges. In Acts of Paul, Glenn Snyder counters this ideological privileging with a thorough reassessment of the assumed early unity of the Acts. He convincingly argues that Acts of Paul is a label that characterizes numerous independent narrative traditions that were later combined into various ad hoc collections, reflected by P. Hamburg, P. Heidelberg, and additional stichometries.

In order to address both of these concerns, Snyder divide his book into two major sections. The first four chapters treat four episodes of the Acts of Paul that were circulated independently in addition to their inclusion in at least one of the major collections: the Martyrdom of Paul, the Ephesus Act, the Acts of Paul and Thekla (APTh) and 3 Corinthians. By treating each of these episodes separately and not part of a hypothesized abstract whole, Snyder is able to engage in thorough comparison between alleged parallels with the canonical Acts as well as trace some of themes and interests of these initially discrete narrative units.

Snyder argues that that the Eutychus/Patroclus stories derive from earlier sources before their inclusion in Acts 20 and the Martyrdom respectively, thus Patroclus is not dependent upon an earlier Eutychus tradition. Paul’s conversion in the Ephesus Act appears not to depend upon any of the conversion stories in Acts 9, 22, or 26, while Lukan editing of the Ephesus Act material may better account for the riot in Ephesus story in canonical Acts. Even though Snyder is tentative with his explanations of literary dependence, his source and redactional theories severely weaken the notion that the Acts of Paul was an early and unified literary whole. That the independently-circulated episodes remember Paul with some different emphases further illustrates their diffuse compositional contexts. Paul is a political figure in the Martyrdom, a witness to God and Christ in the Ephesus Acts, a holy man in the APTh and a letter writer in 3 Corinthians. Still, some affinity remains between episodes. Both APTh and 3 Corinthians are interested in Paul’s absence, and the Ephesus Act and the APTh share interest in asceticism and use lions as illustrative characters.

Snyder’s argument takes fuller shape as he analyzes the collected forms the Acts of Paul, using his previous discussion of individual episodes to support his explanations for the development of the collected traditions. While he distinguishes three different stages or forms that contribute to the Acts of Paul, Snyder does not picture their development as linear. As independent episodes circulated, they were stitched together by some communities into larger narrative sequences. The Martyrdom of Paul was extended into the Passion Narrative, the Ephesus episode and APTh were possibly written together as part of a “Lion Cycle,” and the episodes that detail...
Paul’s travel from Antioch through Mira, Sidon, and then Tyre were also edited together. These sequences continued to interact with individual episodes, hence the prefixing of the Philippian episode and 3 Corinthians to the Passion Narrative and the interpolation of the APTh into the Antioch-Tyre sequence in the Heidelberg manuscript and the addition of the Ephesus episode onto the Passion Narrative in the Hamburg manuscript. Though it can be difficult at times to keep track of all the various episodes, their witnesses, redactional layers, and portraits of Paul, Snyder is able to construct a fairly convincing sketch of the development of the Acts tradition that accounts for the diverse and somewhat fragmentary manuscript evidence.

One of the strengths of this work is the treatment of independently-circulated episodes, with an effort to contextualize the earliest forms of their circulation and textualization. However, some of these efforts more relevant than others and some discussions were entirely lacking. Too much attention was devoted to relating Paul’s martyrdom stories with early traditions of apostolic martyrdoms, while the codicological context of the earliest form of 3 Corinthians was quickly dismissed, in spite of the significant body of scholarship devoted to the question of the collection and contents of the Bodmer codex.

One additional criticism should be directed toward Snyder’s occasionally incorrect use of standard bibliographic terminology. A portion of this book treats the material features of the various codices and fragments that contain the Acts and requires detailed description of those manuscripts. Unfortunately, incorrect terminology, such as mixing up the distinction between folio and leaf, makes his description of P. Hamb., for example, very confusing. This reduces the readers’ ability envision how the codex was put together and thereby follow Snyder’s argument about what may or may not have been included in that collection.

Snyder provides a major overhaul of traditional approaches to the Acts of Paul and its composition and development. His overall argument that Acts of Paul was a title for multiple independent traditions that were variously reworked into larger collections is convincing, even if one wants to dispute some of the more minor source-critical proposals. This new compositional hypothesis should prompt further work on the assembling of early Christian “Acts” literature and the relation of independently-circulated episodes to the rest of early Christian literature.

Gregory P. Fewster
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto


Nicola Denzey Lewis’ book, Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies, offers a much needed look at fate and how Christians and non-Christians were able to free themselves from the “enslavement of fate”. This book is divided into nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, addressing (and readdressing) various texts from the Nag Hammadi Codices, the Pauline corpus, as well as non-Christian sources, with regard to how they understood the concept of fate and how “Gnostic” texts did not address fate in a dissimilar way to other second century texts.

Denzey Lewis’ introduction states her goals for the book: to illustrate how a number of second century Christian writers thought and wrote about the cosmos in similar ways. First by investigating heimarmene (Greek for fate or “enslavement of fate”) and astral fatalism in the first and second centuries;