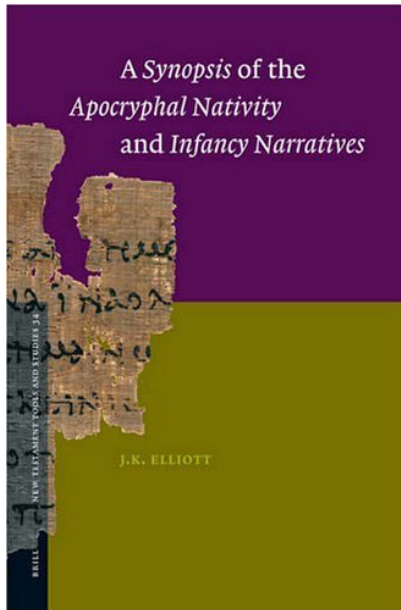


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Elliott, J. K.

A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives

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This volume is the latest contribution to the study of Christian apocrypha by J. K. Elliott, New Testament textual critic and editor of the 1993 revised version of M. R. James's *The Apocryphal New Testament*. The present work contains a brief introduction to several ancient nativity and infancy narratives and a bibliography of the various critical editions of these texts as well as selected general works. The range of texts included in the synopsis, which is based on the *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti*, is largely what one might expect: the canonical accounts of Matthew and Luke, the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, the *Latin Book of the Nativity of Mary*, the *Latin Infancy Gospels* (British Library Arundel 404 and Hereford Cathedral Library O.3.9), the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, Pap. Cairensis 10735, and three Irish texts (a version of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Leabhar Breac*, and the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*). According to Elliott, this collection includes “a representative selection of the most important and interesting later narratives” (x). As Elliott himself remarks, however, several texts—such as the Armenian Infancy Gospel and various versions of the life of Mary—are excluded.

The book's ten chapters address the sequence of events in the various apocryphal and canonical infancy narratives: “Mary's Birth and Upbringing”; “The Annunciation”; “Mary

Visits Elizabeth”; “Mary’s Pregnancy and Its Explanation”; “The Birth of Jesus”; “The Adoration of Jesus after His Birth”; “The Presentation in the Temple”; “The Magi”; “The Slaying of the Infants and the Flight to Egypt”; and “Jesus as a Child.” Each chapter begins with a list of the texts containing the story in question, an inventory of the story that is broken down into smaller subsections, and a summary of the ancient texts that lists the narrative subsections they contain. The synopsis presents each of the texts serially rather than synoptically, because, as Elliott explains on page x, parallel vertical columns were impractical, given the number of texts under consideration. This style of presentation results in yet another feature of each chapter: the use of a system of letters and numbers to label each excerpt, so that readers can “place each gobbet into its context” (xi).

Overall, the book is a welcome contribution to scholarship on Christian apocryphal literature. This handsome volume with English renditions that are easy to read will be a handy reference tool for those wishing to make comparisons between the various texts without having to track down critical editions and individual translation. It is especially valuable because it includes Irish versions of the nativity and infancy traditions, which are not well known. Libraries will no doubt want to have this on their shelves, as it will be a good starting point for research on the nativity and infancy narratives for those uninitiated into the sometimes esoteric study of Christian apocrypha. Unfortunately, the high price of the hardcover edition makes it an unlikely purchase for those who may be casually interested in the subject.

I suspect, however, that the volume will be a disappointment for most scholars interested in the nativity and infancy narratives. Several factors limit the utility of the synopsis. First, the serial presentation (logistically necessary though it may be) makes it more difficult to compare the individual units of text. Second, the absence of the texts in their original languages likewise makes it difficult to do much meaningful comparison. This book is a place to start, but one quickly has to turn to critical editions to draw any real conclusions about the contents of these narratives and their relation to each other. Third, it is irritating that the synopsis often cites the Irish traditions as parallels without providing excerpts of the texts themselves, particularly because these texts are little-known and many people will not have ready access to them. Fourth, it is unfortunate that the synopsis is not more expansive in its scope. Elliott provides no rationale for the exclusion of the *Armenian Infancy Gospel* or other later traditions, the inclusion of which would have made the synopsis invaluable for those wishing to study the multiple trajectories of the nativity and infancy traditions over time. Fifth, although the English renditions of the texts are acceptable, they are sometimes taken from outdated sources that have been superseded by more recent works that rely on superior critical texts. The two Pléiade volumes of *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* edited by François Bovon and the late Pierre Geoltrain are not even mentioned in the bibliography, which likewise omits other

important works on versions of the apocrypha. While Elliott's synopsis will prove useful in many respects and is an important contribution to scholarship, one wishes that its flaws were not so apparent.