

# Exploring Early Christian Identity

Edited by  
BENGT HOLMBERG

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament  
226*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

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Bengt Holmberg

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## Preface

At Lund University in Sweden, the decade of the 1990s had seen a burst of doctoral dissertations and established a lively research culture in the discipline of New Testament Exegesis. The resulting group of young scholars formed a resource that ought to be utilized to make a large, cooperative effort concerning some great subject in our field. So, two of these scholars, Dr Dieter Mitternacht and Dr Anders Runesson, decided together with me to design a research project, with the purpose of understanding the development of the early Christ-movement better than ever before.

That issue had for a long time been locked in a conflict where Catholic and Protestant interpretations of (the earliest) church history decided the latent agenda and therefore also the manifest outcome of exegetical and historical discussions. In addition, the habit of understanding all causes, developments, and conflicts of early Christian history as taking place in an all-decisive arena of ideas was due for revision, if not dismantling. In our project we wanted instead to understand early Christian identity as a complex phenomenon of fundamental beliefs, embodied in the myth, rites, and ethos of living communities, evolving and institutionalizing over time in interplay with local realities. It is no mistake to see Gerd Theissen's important *Eine Theorie der urchristlichen Religion* (Gütersloh 1999) as a vital source of inspiration for our work.

On our second try, we managed in 2002 to convince the Board and expert panels of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation that our application was promising enough for them to support the project "Christian identity – the first 100 years" with a four-year grant of roughly 1,1 million euro. As the project leader, and on behalf of all the project members, I give a special thanks to the Foundation for this generosity. This support meant that, beginning in 2003, half a dozen scholars could work with the project for several years, some full-time, others alongside their other work. The project now involved researchers from various universities outside Lund (Göteborg, Linköping) and a Free Church Theological Seminary (Örebro). Among the participants were two doctoral students and their supervisors.

As part of our working plan for the project, we arranged to leave ordinary work and meet for a full day once every spring and fall semester, in order to do nothing but discuss our own work from lunch one day to the next lunch. Three times we had the benefit of having an international expert with us for such a discussion. The first one was Dr David Sim from

Melbourne, a scholar whose perspective on the relation between text (Matt) and community was rather different from that of the project participants and he challenged all of us to intensive discussion. The second guest was Professor Gerd Theissen from Heidelberg, whose ideas had more or less fuelled the project from its start; during a memorable 24 hours, he gave us the advantage of interacting in person with his invigorating thinking and vast knowledge. Near the end of the project period we asked our own colleague, Professor Samuel Rubenson from Lund, to look at our project ideas and results from the perspective of an accomplished church historian and patristic scholar. We are most grateful to these scholars for enriching our perspectives in this generous manner.

The main part of the results of our Identity project will appear in the ordinary form of scholarly monographs and doctoral dissertations, as well as a number of articles in scholarly journals. Through this anthology we want to give a short, kaleidoscopic overview of research in the project, by letting each participant give a summary of his own research and what its results could mean for the understanding of early Christian identity.

Lund, May 2008

Bengt Holmberg

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# Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity

*Bengt Holmberg*

The Christian church began as a small intra-Jewish renewal movement, marked by a strong conviction that Jesus from Nazareth was the promised messianic liberator of the Jewish people. However the *Christos* or *Mashiah/ M'shichah* they believed in was certainly a Messiah with a difference: crucified and risen from the dead, and as time would soon show, uncongenial as Messiah, not only to the Jewish leaders, but to a large majority of all Jews. Therefore, beside this movement's natural and unquestioned belonging to the Jewish people and religion, there existed within it, right from the start, a consciousness of marginality and of being outsiders in relation to other Jews. During its first 100 years, this originally Jewish movement moved definitely from the pole of belonging to the pole of being outsiders. By the time of the Bar Kochbah uprising (132–135) the "Christ-movement" as a whole had a non-Jewish majority, somewhat estranged from the movement's Jewish origins; for some second-century Christians, to be a Christian even meant that one could not be Jewish. The Christian groups were by then so distinct in beliefs, cult and rites, organization and role behavior that they could be characterized as a new religion.

How this identity change from an intra-Jewish renewal movement to a new religion should be understood was the primary question of the Lund research project, "Christian identity – the first 100 years," from which this book is a report. The formulation of the project, reflected in its name, raises a number of questions that need to be briefly discussed at the outset. Was this really one coherent movement with a common "identity" of its own? Should the term "Christian" (and "Jew/ish") be used about anything or anyone in the first 100 years of this movement? Moreover – by far the largest question – how should the term "identity" be understood and used?

## Was There a Distinct Early Christ-Movement?

For a number of reasons it seems that the answer to this question is yes. Historians do think that they can discern and investigate the phenomenon of a Christ-believing intra-Jewish renewal movement, locating its begin-

ning in the first third of the first century, in areas of the Roman province of Syria populated mainly by Jews, especially in Judea and Galilee. A number of its leading persons can be known, as well as its central beliefs, its significant and distinct rites, and behavior patterns that characterized this movement. Therefore modern historians commonly understand and treat it as one of many ascertainable and distinct entities in first-century history, a movement with its own “identity”, as indicated for example in the preface of the recent *Cambridge History of Christianity*:

We have endeavoured to capture the complexity of early Christianity and its social-cultural setting, whilst also indicating some of the elements that make it possible to trace a certain coherence, a recognisable identity, maintained over time and defended resolutely despite cultural pressure that could have produced something other.<sup>1</sup>

One could go on from this commonly agreed historical presence of the said movement to list briefly some of its defining characteristics:

- The movement had its origin in the historically accessible group formed around the charismatic Jesus from Nazareth, and there existed a personal, sociologically important continuity between that circle of adherents and later leaders of the movement of Christ-believers.<sup>2</sup>
- The movement had a common, central experience or a “mnemonic event” that dominated its thinking and action: the death and resurrection of Jesus followed by the experience of receiving his holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the editors Margaret M. MITCHELL and Frances M. YOUNG write in the preface of the *Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume I: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> For this way of describing Jesus, see Martin HENGEL, *Nachfolge und Charisma: eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu Mt 8:21 f. und Jesu Ruf in die Nachfolge* (Berlin, 1968), and especially Gerd THEISSEN and Annette MERZ, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), part III, which opens with § 8: “Jesus als Charismatiker: Jesus und seine soziale Beziehungen”, 175–220. The continuity between Jesus and his followers was pointed out as an important historical fact by Gerd THEISSEN in his early work, *Die Soziologie der Jesusbewegung [The Sociology of the Jesus Movement]* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Here and later I give terms such as “resurrection” and “receiving the holy Spirit” without quotation marks or other disclaimers, not to treat these phenomena as ordinary facts of undisputed historicity, but simply because they are facts of (historically ascertainable) social cognition, or in other words experienced by the first-century people under investigation here.

On the role of religious experience in the earliest Christ-movement, see for example: James D.G. DUNN, *Jesus and the Spirit: a study of the religious and charismatic experience of Jesus and the first Christians as reflected in the New Testament* (London: Express reprints, 1995), and Luke T. JOHNSON, *Religious experience in earliest Christianity: a missing dimension in New Testament studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). Ben F. MEYER names this “the Easter experience” in his *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986). On social memory, mnemonic events, narrative identity formation, see Samuel BYRSKOG, *Story as History – His-*

- The movement also had a cognitive, cultic, and ritual centre: the person of Jesus. Their understanding of past, present and future history and of their own lives was dominated by christological ideas, and their prayer life and common worship with its initiatory and participatory rites was to a considerable degree focused on the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>
- The movement was from the beginning a strong provocation to its surrounding Jewish society (and later in the diaspora and in non-Jewish contexts). It was not an ordinary variant of Jewish faith and life-style other Jews could accept or at least tolerate. Rather, it was more of a thorn in the flesh, disquieting and unacceptable already in its milieu of origin, and therefore harassed and occasionally persecuted by Jewish authorities, such as the Sanhedrin and Herod Agrippa. Clear evidence of the early intolerable character of the Christ-movement is the energetic attempts of the Pharisee Saul from Tarsus to stamp out (Gk. *porthein*) the new movement in its very first years (Gal. 1:13).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the identity-forming boundaries between Christ-believers and other Jews were there from the start, in spite of the fact that this movement was an undoubtedly Jewish phenomenon.
- To the characteristics that defined the members of this renewal movement belonged also a very high opinion of themselves and their importance in Israel. Their almost cocky self-assertion could be phrased somewhat like: “we are ‘the holy ones’, we are those who have heard and understood God in Jesus the Anointed, we have received his Spirit and said yes to His kingdom, the salvation of Israel resides with us – welcome you too!” This self-understanding was central to the formation of their life and action, and this movement defined itself from its centre. Only in its second and third generations did it devote more attention to defining itself by what separated it from others.

### Are the Labels “Christian” and “Jew/ish” Anachronistic?

To state that the labels “Christian” and “Jew/ish” should not be used for first-century phenomena is becoming something of a scholarly commonplace in works on, *sit venia verbo*, Jewish and Christian ancient history.

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*tory as Story: the Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), as well as his later articles and the following chapter in this book.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Larry W. HURTADO’s works on early devotion to Jesus and binitarian worship of God, *One God, one Lord: early Christian devotion and ancient Jewish monotheism*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1988]), and *Lord Jesus Christ: devotion to Jesus in earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Martin HENGEL, in collaboration with Roland DEINES, *The Pre-Christian Paul*. (London: SCM, 1991).

Many examples could be given, but let one suffice. Philip F. Esler writes:

[T]he current habit of translating *Ioudaioi* as “Jews” and *ethnē* as “gentiles” is indefensible in its anachronism and ... more appropriate renderings are “Judean” and “non-Judean”... The need to be accurate in designating identities, even if they are not ethnic, also demands that we eschew the word “Christian” in relation to first-century CE phenomena. --- It does not appear to have been used as a self-designation by the group until after the New Testament period. Even in the three places just mentioned where it does appear, it reflects outsider use. In addition, the words “Christian” and “Christianity” convey more recent associations alien to the first century. In place of these inappropriate and anachronistic expressions, I prefer “Christ-follower” or “Christ-believer,” “in-Christ,” and “the Christ-movement” when speaking of first century data.<sup>6</sup>

In a later section of the same book, Esler energetically argues for the term *Ioudaioi* as similar to other labels used by Greek and Roman writers about ethnic entities, which usually link people to territory. In all its instances, *Ioudaioi* signifies people with a strong attachment to the land of their origin, Judea, and especially to its temple in Jerusalem. This is lost if we translate the term with “Jews”. In addition, “Jew”, as well as the term “Judaism,” not only carries “meanings indelibly fashioned by events after the first century, including the development of a different identity for the people around the Mishnah” and all of the later Jewish history, acerbating its anachronism. It also opens for, or rather smuggles in, the idea that to be Jewish is a “religious” identity, so introducing the strongly anachronistic Enlightenment idea of religion as something clearly separate from all other social realities.

It is true that anachronisms can creep in through careless use of terms. However, words are not receptacles that automatically contain every meaning that anybody ever put into them. The use of “Jew/ish” and “Christian” about first-century phenomena does not necessitate the importing of, say, fourth-century Judaism or Christianity into these terms. And the label “Jew” is not *per se* morally tainted by its connection to the horrors of modern anti-Semitism (as Esler hints), but gladly used also by modern Jewish scholars about their first-century forebears, not least because of a claimed continuity from them to the present-day Jewish people.

The label *Christianoi* or “Christians” need not by itself signify a group outside Judaism any more than a term like *Pharisaioi* does. Paul does not use the word, but it is hard to see any material difference between this label and some uses of “in Christ”. It also deserves to be pointed out that the label “Christian” undergoes a transformation already in the last third of the first century, as evidenced by 1 Pet 4:16: “If one suffers as a “Christian” (*Christianos*) let him not be ashamed, but glorify God just as a Christian

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<sup>6</sup> Philip. F. ESLESLER, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 12.

[lit. *en tō onomati toutō*, in that very name].” What began as a pejorative nickname used by outsiders seems here on its way to become a label accepted by insiders as a term of honor, because it expressed what they thought really defined them: their belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ, their “Christ-ian” identity. If the label was felt to fit already by first-century Christ-followers, it is hard to understand why modern anxieties about how the term can or might be misunderstood should prevent its use in historical investigation of this very phenomenon. Therefore, I will not restrict the label “Christian/ity” to the fully (?) separate and developed movement of Christ-believers after, say, 130 or 380 C.E., even if one should use it with care.<sup>7</sup>

## Identity in Recent Scholarship on the Christ-Movement

The tentative definition of identity in the previous paragraph needs clearer contours, and I will attempt to provide that through a discussion of some important ideas about early Christian identity put forward in the last few decades. The guiding question of this presentation concerns the degree of concreteness of early Christian identity. To what degree did the different authors envisage identity as a flesh-and-blood reality in the actual life of the first Christians, how tangibly is it thought to have affected and governed the concrete life of this movement? The answers to these questions will tell us what kind of phenomenon early Christian identity is considered to be. I group the alternative answers in a schematic fashion, from low concreteness to high, and they are not mutually exclusive:

- (1) Christian identity is a textual reality, a rhetorical construction with uncertain relation to actual social life.
- (2) Christian identity is a late ideological construct made afterwards by the winners in the movement’s internal struggle for dominance.
- (3) Christian identity is a rhetorical construction produced by entrepreneurs of identity, accepted and acted upon by groups within the movement.
- (4) Christian identity is the autonomous inner structure of the Christian semiotic system.

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<sup>7</sup> A full discussion of these labels is given by Anders Runesson in this book. Against the trend, he advocates using “Jew” and “Judaism” about first-century phenomena because there exists a fundamental continuity between the Jewish people then and in later periods. This, in his opinion, is not the case with the Christ-movement; Christianity proper appears in 380. As one who finds the continuity within the Christ-movement a more salient feature than the undeniable changes and developments, I opt for a more continuity-emphasizing terminology.

- (5) Christian identity is the evolving self-understanding of the movement, shaped by a feedback process between its original experience and its evolving history.

*(1) Identity as a Textual Phenomenon*

Judith Lieu has published important works on questions related to early Christian identity.<sup>8</sup> In *Image and Reality*, she focused on the relationship between Jews and Christians, through studying how the former are pictured in Christian writings of the second century. Her conclusion was that the image of Jews in these writings was created by the need of Christians to make them into their Other, the counter-image that the Christians need in order to explain and confirm themselves. This action is typical for a group or movement that seeks to make clear to itself, and also to others, who they really are and to legitimize their own (separate) existence. As can be expected, that image is antagonistic and polemical, and to a large extent a rhetorical construct that reflects the needs of “othering” the Jews much more than it reflects historical experiences. To what extent it can be used as material for reconstruction of real historical relations between Christians and Jews is a question to which an optimistic answer can hardly be given.

In a following book, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, Lieu collected a number of her essays on similar matters, such as investigations of the “parting of the ways”, the reality of Jewish persecution of Christians, martyrdom and identity, the alleged attraction of Christianity for women and god-fearers. She ended up with a similar conclusion: Christian identity during the first hundred years (and more) was a fragile rhetorical construct, shaped and maintained by the polemical rhetoric of separation from “the Jews”.

In her latest monograph on *Christian Identity*, Lieu treated, from a social-scientific perspective, a good number of further questions concerning identity: the relation between texts and identity, the role of memory in the tradition process, group boundaries, behavior patterns as expressing and forming identity, questions concerning embodiment and gender, as well as localization, and the idea of Christians as a *tertium genus* in addition to Jews and Gentiles. In her learned and acute analysis of all these matters, Lieu is consistently opposed to any kind of essentialism in the understanding of the Christian movement, i.e. the idea that all members of a certain category have some permanent and defining essential characteristics in common. She prefers throughout to speak in terms of process and change.

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<sup>8</sup> Judith M. LIEU, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), and *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Identity is primarily something that the early Christians construct for themselves through texts – not something that they have or share in because of their belonging to the Christ-believing movement. Texts form or “express” identity rather than reflect an existing, tangible every-day reality, and consequently they do not tell us much about that reality. Of course, the textual construction of Christian identity does inform us about an original connection to the Jewish people and about how the boundaries between this matrix and the new movement have developed. The texts *are* anchored in a social reality, but that reality remains largely hidden and inaccessible behind the text, no matter how real it must have been.

An illustration of how reluctant this methodological choice makes Lieu to reach a definite conclusion on historical questions can be taken from her introductory chapter. There she characterizes Ben Meyer’s question whether there is no distinct and lasting identity of the Christian church through its history, as driven mainly by theological interest, perhaps also as an expression of “essentialized Christianity.” No historical investigation of the early Christianity can start from such a presupposition, she says, because it ignores the fact that, after Walter Bauer, we cannot take the original unity and distinct identity of the Christian movement for granted.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there are a number of early indicators of at least some predisposition towards the translocal and transtemporal unity of Christ-believers. Lieu cautiously adds a question that qualifies this degree of unity: “How far can it be reconciled with the historian’s justifiable claim that there was no ‘single church’ in the first two centuries?” quoting Keith Hopkins:

The frequent claims that scattered Christian communities constituted a single church was not a description of reality in the first two centuries C.E., but a blatant yet forceful denial of reality. What was amazing was the persistence and power of the ideal in the face of its unachievability, even in the fourth century.<sup>10</sup>

Whether Hopkins’ statement about church unity is really a “justifiable claim,” or rather a sharply worded hypothesis can be discussed. He sees Christian identity or self-understanding as a piece of theological or ideological wishful thinking, and not as an historical reality. It is hard to know whether Lieu finally gives her indirect support to the stand of Bauer and Hopkins, that there is no such thing as an early, unified Christian identity, or whether she only presents the difficulties of knowing that identity in history.

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<sup>9</sup> LIEU, *Christian Identity*, 22 f. Both Meyer and Bauer will be treated below.

<sup>10</sup> Keith HOPKINS, “Christian Number and Its Implications”, *J ECS* 6 (1998), 185–226, 207. Lieu did not, however, include Hopkins’ sentence about the unachievability of this “ideal” in her quotation.

One can point here to the notable similarity between Lieu's perspective and *Denise Kimber Buell's* treatment of early Christianity and the issue of ethnicity.<sup>11</sup> Buell considers all the early Christian universalistic and somewhat grandiose forms of self-characterization, claiming that Christians are an *ethnos* or a *genos*, as a rhetorical construction on a par with those of other people, such as Jews, Greeks and others. It is a kind of negotiation with the surrounding world but mainly directed inwards to the Christ-believing group or movement itself, intended both to draw up boundaries and to open them, to define oneself, to gain acceptance, and to present oneself as a great and important entity. She emphasizes that there did not exist only one vocabulary or approach in this respect – everything was local, partial, strategically adjusted. Therefore, the analyses of ethnicity language in early Christian texts cannot tell us anything about the historical development of the Christian movement as a whole, nor its self-understanding.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar mode of understanding the relation between texts and historical reality, *Miriam S. Taylor* claims that the anti-Judaism of the church fathers did not build on real contacts and conflicts with a surrounding and vital Judaism, as Marcel Simon had claimed in his epochal monograph *Verus Israel*.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it was a collection of rhetorical-theological conventions or *topoi*, necessary for Christian self-understanding, but not reactions to real historical experiences.<sup>14</sup>

### *Rhetorical Analysis between Pessimistic and Optimistic Epistemology*

The common perspective of all these works in understanding the development of Christian identity is a certain epistemological pessimism about the

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<sup>11</sup> Denise Kimber BUELL, "Rethinking the relevance of race for early Christian self-definition," *HTR* 94 (2001): 449–476. See also by the same author: "Ethnicity and Religion in Mediterranean Antiquity and Beyond," *RelSRev* 26 (2000): 243–249; "Race and universalism in early Christianity," *J ECS* 10 (2002): 429–468; and, with Caroline E. Johnson HODGE, "The politics of interpretation: the rhetoric of race and ethnicity in Paul," *JBL* 123 (2004): 235–251.

<sup>12</sup> "Analyzing texts for ethnic reasoning draws our attention to rhetorical contexts concerned with establishing or preserving boundaries, either between non-Christians and Christians or among Christians. This analysis frustrates any attempts to chart a developmental progression in how and why Christian authors employ ethnic reasoning. Rather, this approach honors the diverse ways of producing and contesting Christianness in the Roman imperial period. This approach attempts to resist monolithic reconstructions of early Christian history by emphasizing the partial and strategic character of early Christian claims to universality and unity." BUELL, in the conclusion of her *HTR* article from 2001 (see previous note).

<sup>13</sup> Marcel SIMON, *Verus Israel: étude sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'Empire romaine (135–425)* (Paris: Boccard, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> Miriam S. TAYLOR, *Anti-Judaism and early Christian Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

possibility of knowing the past. What we have as historians is only a number of ancient (mainly Christian) texts, and the relation between these texts and their referent is seen as tenuous and highly uncertain. Therefore, an epistemological pessimist accepts only that as historically secure, which cannot be denied, i.e. the text and its textual world, and leaves aside questions about the relation between the textual world and the rest of the world. In order to be on secure historical ground, one has to restrict oneself to investigating the textual world of these documents, while the flesh-and-blood human and social reality that produced, received, and used these documents lies largely outside our historical reach.<sup>15</sup>

If undeniability, or even high certitude, is the criterion to be met by statements on history, historical research would inevitably be stymied, and not much could be stated about the past. An optimistic, ordinary historian, on the other hand, aims lower in historical certitude, but wants to reach judgments about what probably happened, and therefore allows more incertitude in seeking to make sense of all the data from the past. The sense-making is achieved through a process of verification and falsification of competing hypotheses. The purpose is to arrive at a qualified judgment, about which of these reconstructions of the past is the historically most probable one. “Most probable” does not mean “undeniably true”, but rather a defensible, yet improvable, approximation of historical truth. So, the choice of epistemological perspective can be seen as a choice of scope or of level for one’s historical investigation. To choose to analyze only the textual world of extant sources is of course a perfectly valid enterprise, but one that will not allow a researcher to say very much, positively or negatively, about historical reality.

It can be noted in passing that the trend of restricting historical work to the textual world of ancient documents is somewhat reminiscent of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century historiography. Then, the very real methodological advances of source criticism resulted in a growing distrust of the ancient sources as providers of historical information about anything except themselves, while nowadays the very real advances of rhetorical criticism seem to be driving scholarship in the same pessimistic direction.

Rhetorical analysis is somehow situated between these two kinds of research that focus (a) on the textual world, or (b) on the concrete, historical world of human beings. It is not a purely textual and ahistorical type of analysis, because even if it does take a very close look at how the text is built, it also focuses on the actual communication process between human beings of which the text is a part. The “rhetorical situation” belongs to rhetorical analysis, and the interest in the composition and structure as a re-

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<sup>15</sup> Lieu’s approach to historical reconstruction is also discussed in Mikael TELLBE’s chapter in this book (pp. 118–119).

flection of the author's intent to convince, persuade, and change things in the real world often leads the researcher into making statements about that world, i.e. to make historical or quasi-historical statements.

Such statements are not seldom based on a kind of (social-)psychological reading of literary elements in the text, offering, as it were, a shortcut to historical knowledge ("this text demonstrates this perspective or that intention, which must reasonably be caused by this or that historical situation"). Unless substantiated by ordinary, laborious historical analysis and reconstruction, such hunches remain at the level of hypothesis. There is a certain risk that such "rhetorical" readings assume a too imaginative picture of text production in ancient times and how it related to historical reality (such as: texts were produced with no checks concerning veracity, for a gullible readership, and persuasion overrode all other aspects).

Rhetorical awareness can also make the scholar adopt the opposite assumption, that every piece of writing from ancient times must be classified as "nothing-but-rhetorical-construction" and therefore of no historical value. Such a position annihilates the possibility of writing scholarly responsible history, and in spite of its apparent humility, it is another type of encroachment on that discipline. Both these perspectives – the overconfidence of using rhetorical insights for statements on historicity, and the underconfidence of using them to deny the possibility of any historicity – lead to an increased use of inverted mirror reading. This means that the historical investigation starts with the idea that events simply must have been different from what the sources say. Such a hermeneutic of growing suspicion will make ancient sources less and less usable, while it also makes hypotheses and reconstructions assumed by the modern scholar increasingly important in historical work.

## *(2) Identity as a Post-Factum Ideological Construct*

There are a number of scholars, who operate with a picture or model of early Christianity that might be called the scenario of "centerless multiplicity" or, in other words, of a movement characterized by great variety and no obvious center that defines and governs the whole. A classic formulation of this idea is the one launched by Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), who saw the new Christian movement or "church" as existing in two strongly opposed variants almost from the start: the Petrine, Jewish-Christian variant, which was still Torah-observant, and the Pauline, "law-free" type, which was pointedly non-observant with regard to the Law of Moses. The Petrine type of Christianity was the original one, i.e. the "thesis" in Baur's Hegel-inspired philosophy of history, while the Pauline type was its "antithesis". So, original Christian identity is not one, but rather several competing ones. Actually, it took a good century for the Christian

church to work out an intermediate, harmonizing compromise between these strongly opposed alternatives, a “synthesis” that was the early catholic Church (Frühkatholizismus). Only then can one really talk about a common Christian identity, which is obviously a late product, only emerging after at least a century of stormy church history.

This idea has had a great influence especially on Protestant scholarship, in various forms. Some deplored the synthesis that developed as the outcome of this struggle for unity. They viewed it as a falling off from the high and authentically Christian level of Pauline Christianity, and as mixed up with elements derived from Judaism, as well as from the baser institutional factors operative in a worldly context.

In 1934 the well-known lexicographer of the Greek New Testament, Walter Bauer (1877–1960), published an historical work about orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the early church, which he considered as Christian identities in competition from the very beginning. Bauer’s original work became influential among scholars of early Christianity only after it had been translated into English in 1971.<sup>16</sup> Its ensuing success may have something to do with the fact that his great debunking of previous historical models fitted precisely into the emerging post-modern climate.

In spite of the words “earliest Christianity” in the title, Bauer set out to investigate Christianity in the second century, where the sources give us a picture of enormous multiplicity, strong conflicts, and prolonged struggle for dominance among different types of Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Several of these Christianities would have been considered “heretical” by later generations in the third or fourth century, while others were more “orthodox”. Bauer’s specific question was which type of Christianity was the earliest in a number of important localities. His contention was that the picture of the church given by Eusebius of Caesarea in the beginning of the fourth century as completely “apostolic” and unified in the beginning, and then more and more assaulted by marginal heretical groups, was actually the opposite of historical reality. In places like Edessa, Syria or Egypt, the “heretical” types of Christianity (esp. influenced by Gnosticism) were actually both earlier and larger than the purported “orthodox” groups. This was changed only by energetic struggle, supported and led by the well-organized Roman church, which managed to implant its own type of Christianity in other

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<sup>16</sup> Walter BAUER, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1934, 2d ed. 1964). The second edition was translated by American scholars and published as *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Earliest Christianity*, edited by Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> In Bauer’s opinion the New Testament had too little material and was too much in dispute to serve as the starting point for his investigation: “...scheint das Neue Testament zu unergiebig und auch zu umstritten zu sein, um als Ausgangspunkt dienen zu können.” *Rechtgläubigkeit* (2nd ed., 1964), 5.

places. The Roman way of being Christian was characterized by traditionalism and a strong influence from Greek-speaking Judaism and its holy scriptures, the Septuagint, but not very open to Pauline or Johannine Christianity, and even less to Gnostic types of Christianity. The different “heretical” movements, such as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, the Valentinians, or the Montanists, did not form one united front, and, unlike “orthodoxy,” did not have a form of faith and life suitable for mass practice, and were therefore eventually marginalized and pushed back.<sup>18</sup> When the (Roman) “orthodox” type of Christianity had been more generally established, the description of it as the original and apostolic type of Christianity was of course generally accepted, although it was, from a historical perspective, a rhetorical construction made by the winners of the intra-Christian dominance struggle.

As noted above, Bauer investigated second-century and later Christianity, not the New Testament. His perspective had of course to be applied to the first century of the Christian movement as well, evidenced by the New Testament writings. The basic idea of multiple origins of the Christian movement, or at least a very early diversification thereof, which eventually is reined in, and becomes more of, an institutionalized unity has numerous proponents among scholars. One important such work, which also expressly refers to and praises Bauer’s work as “essentially right,” is James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (1971).<sup>19</sup> A trajectory is the path that a moving object follows in space, and in a transferred sense, it means a path, progression, or line of development that resembles a physical trajectory. The New Testament writings are seen as evidence of several such distinct lines of development – the Johannine, the Jewish-Christian/Ebionite, the Matthean, the Pauline and Post-Pauline, which would only converge and be seen as expressing one Christian faith in the canonization process that more or less began in the second half of the second century. Thus, again, unity grew out of a preceding, perhaps even original diversity. A question seldom broached or answered is how and when a movement with a one-person origin and indubitable continuity from this origin to a known group of Galileans exploded into a plethora of

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<sup>18</sup> “ein für den Massenbrauch am besten geeignete Glaubens- und Lebensform”, as W. Bauer puts it in his own summary of his research, “Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum” in *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 10 (1934), col. 99–101, here 100; reprinted in W. BAUER, *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften*, hrsg. v Georg Strecker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1967), 229–233.

<sup>19</sup> James M. ROBINSON and Helmut KOESTER, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

wildly divergent Christ-believing groups that it took some two centuries to connect to each other in a semblance of unity.<sup>20</sup>

James D. G. Dunn was prompted by the work of Bauer to investigate the question of unity and diversity in the New Testament, as well as the question whether and where one meets the phenomenon of heretical diversity. His conclusion was that, in spite of the diverse formulations of Christian faith, all writings inside the New Testament canon, are one in holding the view that the earthly Jesus and the risen, heavenly Christ are identical, one and the same person. Those who in various ways separate the earthly from the heavenly Jesus leave the unity of faith with the New Testament and the rest of the church and become heretical. This is a development, however, that starts only outside and after the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> Dunn's thesis is a Yes and a No to the Bauer thesis: Yes, the earliest Christianity was multi-form and very varied already in the New Testament and the first century, but No, it was not lacking unity in the fundamental parts of its faith. Its identity and unity, when measured in the cognitive, doctrinal dimension, are intact.

Bart D. Ehrman stated his Bauer-influenced thesis already in the title of his book: *Lost Christianities*.<sup>22</sup> The early Christ movement in the second and third centuries was characterized by an incredible variation, with any number of ideas about God and Christ, about the Jews and the Holy Scriptures, and about the way to live a Christian life. No group or trajectory had a central position or a monopoly on definition of what Christian faith or praxis should look like. Some time into the third century, the "proto-orthodox" Christianity gained ascendancy and managed eventually to mar-

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<sup>20</sup> In the Society of Biblical Literature seminar on "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," a group of scholars cooperated for three years in creating a history of early Christianity as having multiple origins. The work was summarized in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, ed. by R. CAMERON and M. P. MILLER, (SBL Symposium Series 28, Atlanta: SBL, 2004). The standard picture of the Christ-movement originating in Jerusalem (as in Acts) is too simple: it must have had multiple origins, some even in the diaspora. The authors reconstruct one of the movement's roots as the alleged "Q community", a Galilean, small-town intelligentsia of scribes, and question the accuracy of Acts by claiming that the sayings of Jesus could have caused neither his crucifixion, nor the emergence in Jerusalem of a messianic movement focused on him. James DUNN, in his scathing review in *JBL* 124 (2005), 760–764 considers the result of this project as far less credible than the ordinary, Acts-based story. In historical work, extant sources are always preferable to imaginary ones.

<sup>21</sup> James D. G. DUNN, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM, 1977, 2d ed. 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Bart D. EHRMAN, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). On page 173, Ehrman characterizes Bauer's work as "arguably the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century".