THE ORIGINS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture

ROBYN FAITH WALSH

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Conventional approaches to the Synoptic gospels argue that the gospel authors acted as literate spokespersons for their religious communities. Whether described as documenting intragroup "oral traditions" or preserving the collective perspectives of their fellow Christ-followers, these writers are treated as something akin to the Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk* – a questionable framework inherited from nineteenth-century German Romanticism. In this book, Robyn Faith Walsh argues that the Synoptic gospels were written by elite cultural producers working within a dynamic cadre of literate specialists, including persons who may or may not have been professed Christians. Comparing a range of ancient literature, her groundbreaking study demonstrates that the gospels are creative works produced by educated elites interested in Judean teachings, practices, and paradoxographical subjects in the aftermath of the Jewish War and in dialogue with the literature of their age. Walsh's study thus bridges the artificial divide between research on the Synoptic gospels and classics.

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For my parents, Thomas and Kathleen Walsh

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Preface

On January 29, 1885, a man known only as "C.B.W." traveled from Berlin to Zürich by means of a meandering train.[1] Prone to understatement and with an economy of words, he described the vistas of timber, mines, and "craggy" castles from his compartment window as he crossed the Elbe ("a large river") and the Rhine (undescribed) and arrived in Switzerland ("hilly") and, ultimately, his "handsome" destination.[2] Our mystery man was there to call upon a certain Gustav Volkmar, Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Zürich, and President of the Society of Critical Historical Theology. His purpose in visiting Volkmar is unclear. But he found the professor and his daughter "so congenial" that he "determined to remain some weeks" in their company.[3]

In the course of this ambiguous residency, C.B.W. had occasion to attend a number of Volkmar's lectures. His record of these talks, and Volkmar's interactions with his students and interlocutors, is a time capsule, of sorts, of a particular kind of discourse in the European academy at the fin de siècle:

The lectures of the President to his class, were sufficient to mark him as a pronounced liberal. He took occasion in one of his lectures to explain to the class that there could not have been an eclipse of the sun at the time of the crucifixion,

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[1] "C.B.W." is likely Charles B. Waite, according to the index of writers presented in the front matter of the volume, as I will discuss. See "Notes of Travel," *Chicago Law Times*, vol. 2, ed. Catharine V. Waite (Chicago: C. V. Waite, 1888), 326–28.

[2] Waite, "Notes of Travel," 326   [3] Waite, "Notes of Travel," 326–27.

because it was at the time of the full moon. This I thought was good science but weak theology.[4]

I confess that the phrase "good science but weak theology" pops into my head quite often. And then there were Volkmar's thoughts on the resurrection and his position in the field:

At another time, he asked the class what was the nature of the resurrection of Christ, and when one of the students answered, "Es war eine erscheinung," the old gentleman replied, "Das ist recht." On returning from class, I asked him, if the resurrection was only an appearance, how he explained the rolling away of the stone from the tomb. He replied, "There was no tomb. Jesus was put to death as a malefactor, and such were denied burial." Some of our divines would be shocked at these doctrines, but Professor Volkmar is paid by the State as a religious teacher. I asked him if the more orthodox professors did not make war upon him. He replied that they had done so in former years, but had concluded to let him alone. They went their way, and he went his.[5]

These anecdotes are from a somewhat obscure source: a back-page travelogue for the 1888 edition of the *Chicago Law Times*. I came across a scanned copy of C.B.W.'s "Notes of Travel" while researching Volkmar, and found the periodical in which it is contained to be highly eclectic in its content: a series of articles on various legal cases, as one might expect, are presented alongside gems like "Diogenes or Antipater, Which?," an article that manages to connect the Stoic wisdom of Cicero to the sale of a barren, blooded cow in Michigan. The editor of the periodical, one Catharine V. Waite, boasts an impressive résumé as an activist, suffragist, lawyer, and polymath in Chicago, leading protest movements and founding a number of literary societies, support networks for women, and, among other ventures, the seemingly short-lived *Chicago Law Times*. (Incidentally, rumor has it she was also more than capable with a six-shooter.)[6] "C.B.W." is almost certainly her husband, Charles Burlingame Waite, a lawyer appointed by President Abraham Lincoln to the Utah Supreme Court during the Civil War. His "Notes of Travel" from Paris to Berlin to Zürich and back again are, at once, absorbing and, for a fellow scholar of New Testament more than a century later, poignant.

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[4] Waite, "Notes of Travel," 327.   [5] Waite, "Notes of Travel," 327.
[6] "Catharine Van Valkenburg Waite," in *Women Building Chicago 1790–1990: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Rima Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 922.

Take, for example, Waite's chronicle of one of his last conversations with the then seventy-five-year-old Volkmar:

The last day I was in Zurich, we took a long walk together … we took a seat on a bench near that magnificent lake … I told him we should probably never meet again in this life … and asked him if he did not believe in another state of existence.

   The old man turned upon me his large full eye, with a suddenness that was almost startling. "Why do you ask this?" He said. I replied, I had no object except simply to know his opinion. "Well," said he, with deliberation, "that is something I know nothing about. All the teachings of Jesus related to this life. The Kingdom of God which he was seeking to establish, was to be upon the earth. To live again, is something to be hoped, but nothing is revealed to us upon the subject. The arguments in favor of a future existence must be drawn from outside the gospels."[7]

On the cusp of the turn of the century and all that lay beyond – advancing industrialization, globalization, continued imperialism, and, crucially, the world wars – Volkmar's lectures and beliefs offer a glimpse into a historical moment arguably eclipsed by the tumult of those subsequent years. The advent of Higher Criticism, a free(er) press, and the emergence of liberal politics in the latter decades of the nineteenth century allowed scholars like Volkmar to occupy positions in the European academy. Yet, as assuredly as any tide rises, an increasing concern for the secularization of society and, by extension, the university, brought forward a Protestant-Catholic backlash expressed through a variety of "repressed neoromantic narratives" and strategies. Among these strategies was an approach to the New Testament and its historical context that used these writings as a tool to reclaim and revive the "spirit" and "faith" of the middle-class in Germany, Switzerland, England, France, and beyond. Practices like *Religionsgeschichte* promised to reveal lost communities of fellow-believers, merging a "scientific" approach to antiquity with the opportunity for a "renewal of faith."[8] Scholarly and popular interest in so-called Christian origins, the layers and dates of early Christian texts, evidence for the oral traditions of a lost *Volk*, and the historical Jesus became a fairground for litigating debates old and new: Had liberal theologians and scholars neglected faith with their critical methods?

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[7] Waite, "Notes of Travel," 327–28.
[8] Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 253.

Overdetermined the value of so-called orientalism? Forgotten "the people"? As the founder of Form Criticism, Hermann Gunkel, lamented at the turn of the century in *Die Christliche Welt*:

If God had wanted me to have a voice that would penetrate the hearts and minds of every scholar of theology (*die Herzen und Gewiffen der theologilchen Forfcher dringt*), I would proclaim . . . do not forget your holy duty to your people (*Volk*)! Write for the educated (*die Gebildeten*)! Do not talk so much about literary criticism (*Litterarkritik*), text criticism (*Textkritik*) . . . but talk about religion (*redet über Religion*)! . . . Our people thirsts [*sic*] for your words about our religion and its history (*Unfer Volk dürftet nach euren Worten über die Religion und ihre Gefchichte*)![9]

What constitutes "religion" in Gunkel's construction are the very things that the *traditionsgeschichtliche* method sought: the interests, practices, and concerns of "lost" peoples and communities, their beliefs, their lives, and their oral stories. To the extent that a piece of writing like Paul's letters or one of the canonical gospels represents a historical moment, for those sympathetic to the work of this segment of the Religions-Historical School, they also represented the "culmination of long periods in which religious ideas and practices were transmitted orally and informally."[10] Classically trained philologists had little interest in *koiné* or Silver Greek and left the theologians to it. Over time, a conceptual divide grew within scholarship between the literate, culturally and socially elite Greek and Roman writer and the humble, illiterate peasant. Increased interest in material culture, newly found papyri from places like Oxyrhynchus, and a Romantic desire to reclaim the Greco-Roman world (à la the Grand Tour) reinforced the idea that there were communities outside the text yet to be discovered. As Adolf Deissmann proclaimed in his *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte aus dem hellenistisch-römischen Welt* in 1908, the "primeval prejudices of the Atticizers" had obscured "the embeddedness of primitive Christianity in folk culture (*die*

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[9] Hermann Gunkel, "Ein Notschrei aus Anlaß des Buches Himmelsbild und Weltanschauung im Wandel der Zeiten," *Die Christliche Welt* 14 (1900): 58–61, cit. 60. I have taken some liberties with the translation of "über die Religion" above; by including the article "die" Gunkel is implying that there is one religion – Christianity – that is of primary concern. For this reason, I elected to use "our" to convey the same meaning. This quote is also cited by Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 263, albeit with a different translation.

[10] Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 266.

Volkstümlichkeit des Urchristentums)."[11] The faith and cohesion of these humble, illiterate so-called primitive Christians had much to offer the Wilhelmine and Victorian and Weimar Christian facing the threat of cultural secularization. And the development of new scholarly, *wissenschaftliche* methods made it possible to demonstrate that Christianity had been, from the beginning, a religion by and for the people. More maliciously, it would also enable scholars to link these early Christians to a pursuit of Aryan history, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

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At its core, this book is a study of the "knowledge-making practices" of the field of early Christianity and New Testament studies, its assumptions about communities and authors, and its possible alternatives.[12] Conventional approaches to the Synoptic gospels argue that the gospel authors acted as literate spokespersons for their religious communities. Whether described as documenting intragroup "oral traditions" or preserving the collective perspectives of their fellow Christ-followers (e.g., the Markan, Matthean, or Lukan "churches"), the gospel writers are treated as something akin to the Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk*. By contrast, Greek and Latin authors describe themselves writing within (and for) literary networks of fellow *writers* – a competitive field of educated peers and associated literate specialists who possessed the necessary training and the technical means for producing and publishing their own writings. This is a more plausible social context for the gospel writers. And it is this social context that this book examines, questioning how our understanding of early Christianity changes once we shift our frame from inherited notions of community, *Volk*, and *Geist* and, instead, bring new methods from literary theory and the broader social sciences to bear on these writings.

This monograph argues that the Synoptic gospels were written by elite cultural producers working within a dynamic cadre of literate specialists – including persons who may or may not have had an understanding of being "in Christ." Through comparison with a range of ancient *bioi* (lives), histories, and novels, this study demonstrates that the gospels are creative literature produced by educated elites interested in Judean

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[11] Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte aus dem hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr Siebeck, 1908), 282; Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 269.
[12] Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, xxxiii.

teachings, practices, and paradoxographical subjects in the aftermath of the Jewish War. It provides a more concrete account of the processes by which the gospels likely were written and establishes that they are in dialogue with writings and writers of their age rather than assuming that they were produced by or for "Christian communities."

Despite the title of this monograph, I do not seek "origins" for early Christianity and the gospel writers in the sense that I am not attempting to assert the uniqueness – or unique genesis – of Christianity. Likewise, I do not scrutinize dates for these writings, and I do not engage in extensive critiques of specific members of our guild. Instead, I am interested in offering a broad-based examination of how we have practiced scholarship in the field of religious studies, followed by constructive suggestions on how we might approach that practice differently. As I explain in the Introduction, a focus on writers, *their* practices, and their particular social formations is by no means a threat to our field, but an opportunity to develop a more fine-grained and historically plausible understanding of the process by which writings about Jesus were composed, shared, and contributed to the growth and eventual cohesion of a movement. As a scholar, the approach that I am advocating is not allied consciously to any present social, political, or religious objective other than a desire to better understand the dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean world. I am, however, conscious of my desire to identify and, if possible, continue to rectify any approaches and methods that have traded on the "sacred" authority of the gospels in order to advance particular religious, political, nationalistic, racist, or anti-Semitic viewpoints. In this respect, this book represents a search for origins, but the origins of our scholarly practices and their legacies. Situated as I am within a scholarly genealogy only two or three generations removed from the likes of Gunkel, Johannes Weiss, and Martin Heidegger, I am struck by the fact that we still have much work to do in reflecting on the fraught history of our field, its influences, and its influencers. I hope this monograph contributes to that work as we in the secular academy continue to strive for good science and weak theology.

Abbreviations

References to ancient sources appear in both the footnotes and the body of the text, according to context. All ancient authors and works are abbreviated according to the conventions of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th ed.), unless otherwise noted. Journals and related sources are referenced in accordance with *L'Année philologique*. The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works, book collections, reference materials, and so forth.

ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*

CIL *Corpus inscriptionum latinorum* (volume and item number)

DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Berlin, 1952.

FHG *Fragmenta historicorum graecorum*, 5 vols. Ed. C. Müller and T. Müller. Paris, 1843–70.

IG *Inscriptiones graecae*. Berlin, 1873– .

LCL Loeb Classical Library

OCD *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. Ed. S. Hornblower et al. Oxford, 2012.

P. Oxy. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Egypt Exploration Society. London, 1912–.

PI *The Philo Index: A Complete Greek Word Index to the Writings of Philo of Alexandria*. Ed. P. Borgen et al. Eerdmans; Brill, 2000.

PMG *Poetae Melici Graeci*. Ed. D. L. Page. Oxford, 1962.

SBL Society of Biblical Literature

SEG *Supplementum epigraphicum graecum*, vols. 1–42. Amsterdam.

Note on the Text

All translations, both ancient and modern, are my own unless otherwise noted.

At times, I cite scholars within this monograph who have been accused of or charged with crimes and other serious offenses, or who have known ties to prejudiced organizations (e.g., the National Socialist Party in Germany). It is my strong preference not to offer these individuals professional acknowledgment given the nature of their actions and associations. That said, it would be intellectually misleading for me to omit entirely reference to certain works and persons, particularly as it pertains to my critique of German Romanticism and its legacies of anti-Semitism and racism. Therefore, I have endeavored only to cite such individuals when absolutely necessary to my argument and the conventions of the field.

Introduction

"Diamonds in a Dunghill": Seeking New Approaches in Early Christian Studies

When Thomas Jefferson took up a razor to piece together his *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, his goal was to strip away, quite literally, the vestiges of ancient philosophy and so-called gnosticism that had convoluted the work of the "simple evangelists." In a letter to John Adams, he boasted that the "primitive simplicity" of early Christianity was as plain as "diamonds in a dunghill." Strategically pasting together passages from the canonical gospels, he imagined himself liberating the text from the "logos and demiurges, aeons and daemons" of Christian Platonists. This "Jefferson Bible" intended to lay bare the pure teachings of a remarkable, ancient moralist.[1] While Jefferson's assembled text illustrates the extent to which scripture is "good to think with," as Claude Lévi-Strauss once said, it also stands as evidence for how scripture, in a sense, changes over time.[2]

Jonathan Z. Smith charged, somewhat ironically, that the historical-critical study of the Bible suffers from an antiquarian bias. This bias is exemplified by the tendency of scholars to begin their evaluations of ancient materials from the point of a text's prehistory "but never its

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[1] Cited from Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 159. On the influence of Jefferson's works and letters on the study of Christianity, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," in *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1–35. Also see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 287.

[2] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 2 (1971): 131–40.

subsequent history."[3] Our earliest writings about Jesus are not only artifacts of the ancient Mediterranean but also artifacts of second-eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century thought.[4] Others such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith have made similar claims noting that scholars of Christian origins should approach their source material "not merely as a set of ancient documents or even as a first- and second-century product but as a third-century and twelfth-century and nineteenth-century and contemporary agent."[5] The Jefferson Bible is a fine example of the subsequent handling of scripture in the service of gaining insights into Christian history. Such activity need not be literal as with Jefferson and his razor, but it can be evident in the frameworks, terms, and methods used to describe the beginnings of Christianity.

Jefferson's larger correspondence reveals that his stitchery was a well-intentioned attempt at historiography. Jefferson and his cohort perceived that the gospel writers had injected popular philosophy into their accounts of Jesus' life in order to make his teachings more palatable to a Roman (i.e., "pagan") audience.[6] The notion that the so-called primitive Christians would have been in any way "philosophical" agitated against a strongly held vision of Jesus as a humble moral teacher tailed by his "unlettered apostles." Chief among these incursions was a breed of Platonism that, in Jefferson's view, smacked of Trinitarianism. He cautioned that "it is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one and one is three." Jefferson's planned "euthanasia for Platonic Christianity" remained fixed on this particular motif.[7]

Hindsight suggests that Jefferson's terms and methods were greatly influenced by eighteenth-century Deist and anti-Catholic polemics in

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[3] Jonathan Z. Smith, *On Teaching Religion*, ed. Christopher I. Lehrich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30.

[4] J. Z. Smith raises this same issue in the case of the "J" and "Q" sources in *On Teaching Religion*, 30.

[5] Smith, "The Study of Religion," 134; Smith, *On Teaching Religion*, 30. Also see Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 1–35. I also cite this quote from W. C. Smith in Robyn Faith Walsh, "Q and the 'Big Bang' Theory of Christian Origins," in *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Barry S. Crawford and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 483–533, cit. 483.

[6] Jefferson's conversation partners on Christianity include John Adams and Joseph Priestly. See E. P. Smith, *Priestly in America: 1794–1804* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1920), 122–24, 145–46. This source is also cited in Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 3, n. 2.

[7] Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 9; L. J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 1–2, 2:433.

which he was something of a participant-observer.[8] Working from an Enlightenment vocabulary, he reinscribed binary categories of orthodoxy and heresy, theology and philosophy, Judaism and Hellenism in his evaluations while simultaneously professing to offer a more accurate representation of the first century C.E.[9] Related arguments against "pagan imprinting" on the historical Jesus would continue to have enormous influence on subsequent studies of early Christianity and late antiquity.[10] Ultimately, Jefferson's ambition may have been to reconstruct the sayings of the historical Jesus to his liking, but his efforts revealed more about Jefferson's own interests than those of his subject – as is often the case.[11]

The conceit of the Jefferson Bible was that the gospel writers manufactured *lives* about Jesus and his followers reflective of certain aims and sensibilities. For Jefferson, the gospels' so-called paganism revealed that they were constructed narratives whose purpose lay beyond offering a historically authentic account of the earliest stages of the Jesus movement. The irony of Jefferson's charge is thick, but he was correct in positing that early Christian literature was not strictly concerned, to paraphrase

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[8] Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 9; Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:385.

[9] The false dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism is addressed in more detail by Troels Engberg-Pedersen in his 2001 *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*. In that edited volume, Engberg-Pedersen explains that the ideological implications of each term have served to create artificial distinctions between the people, practices, and language of Judea and the rest of the Greek and Roman world. As I argue in Chapter 2, this interpretation has roots in Romantic thinking about the peoples and places of the ancient Mediterranean (including political and anti-Semitic leanings). Engberg-Pedersen acknowledges influence from the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*; however, he convincingly argues that the territories "conquered and held by Alexander the Great and his successors and then by the Romans" constituted more of a "cultural melting pot" than is usually recognized. As such, we should understand Judaism as one of a number of "traditions with roots before the Hellenistic period proper," like the traditions of Greece and Rome that experienced significant interface and overlap with one another. Engberg-Pedersen also effectively argues that the Judaism/Hellenism divide maintains traditional, theological readings that render early Christian writings and, particularly, Paul as "pawns in a power game." This "game" views the representative texts and practices of Christianity not as fully integrated within Mediterranean society but as incomparably unique and "new" within its historical, cultural, and literary context. See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed., *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–4.

[10] Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 13.

[11] A recent example of personal narrative evidently informing critical theses is Matthew D. C. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), see xiii–xv. Invoking Bakhtin, Larsen conflates modern forms of writing practices and publication (his own) with antiquity.

Plutarch, with writing histories.[12] Jefferson intuited that the gospel writers were, first and foremost, *writers* functioning within a particular medium and employing known and conventional tools of their trade. Their literary choices rendered an idealized vision of Jesus and his life using details more strategic than historical. As Celsus recognized centuries before Jefferson, in reading these works one quickly realizes that their content "may or must be mendacious."[13] For various reasons, the gospels were suitable for use as a canonized origin story for the Jesus movement, but by modern standards of veracity, they ultimately reveal little about the beginnings they profess to relate. Rather, the gospels reveal more about the *writers* who created them and the subsequent generations of readers who have endorsed and perpetuated Christianity's own myth of origins.

THE PARADIGM OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Jefferson's struggle is emblematic of certain tensions that undergird studies of the New Testament and Christian history: When reconstructing the past on the basis of creative literature like the gospels, how can we meaningfully distinguish between fiction and history?[14] Has the ongoing desire for details – any details – about the reputed origins of this still actively practiced religion led scholars to tread too far into speculation or, in the words of Burton Mack, "fantasy" in their assessments of these texts?[15] In contradistinction to a field like classics – where few of the gods and practices described are still believed – "religious" writings are freighted with a significance that does not attend other kinds of historical

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[12] Plut. *Vit. Alex.*, 1.2: "For it is not histories we are writing (ἱστορίας γράφομεν) but lives (βίους). It is not always the most famous deeds which illuminate a man's virtues and vices (ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας); often a clearer insight into a man's character is revealed by a small detail, a remark, or a joke (πρᾶγμα βραχὺ... ῥῆμα... παιδιά), than by battles where tens of thousands die, or by the greatest of conflicts, or by the siege of cities." Greek taken from Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch Lives, VII*, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

[13] Celsus is quoted by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, cit. 2.55; cited in G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7.

[14] The category distinction between fiction and history, both ancient and modern, is discussed in Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, passim, as well as M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and Mediterranean Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1–45.

[15] Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 9.

data; the gospels are read by some as a faithful account of what happened to Jesus and his followers. They are also, in part, responsible for the formation of Western concepts of morality and law. Consequently, vignettes about – and particular understandings of – the teachings of Jesus are broadly familiar to popular audiences, and familiarity can breed critical complacency. Within the secular academy, we have inherited certain methods for reading these "sources" that are specific to our fields and not easily challenged, for both professional and personal reasons. With such high stakes, it is little wonder that the study of religion tends toward reifying tradition.[16] What we ascribe to these texts is so extraordinary; how could we expect them to have been produced in an ordinary way?

This book argues against approaches to the Synoptic gospels that treat them principally as religious texts. Such approaches impede our ability to evaluate these works as we would any other kind of Greco-Roman literature. While these methods are born of our desire for a more concrete understanding of Christian beginnings, they have led us to presume the existence of cohesive religious groups and theological diversity, all the while uncritically invoking the language of "community."[17] Scholarship that insists on reclaiming the social networks of the gospel writers has been particularly troubled. We know a great deal about Mediterranean and West Asian writers and writing practices, yet analyses of the gospels continue to muddle their social circumstances in order to speak of oral traditions, Christian communities and their literate spokesmen, or the gospels "before authors."[18] We continually look for evidence of socially marginal, preliterate Christian groups in these works, treating the gospel

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[16] I am influenced here by Elizabeth Clark, who says of microhistory/*Alltagsgeschichte*: "the personal quality of its subject matter encouraged a too-easy identity with the people represented and their emotions, obscuring the 'otherness' of the past." Here she is summarizing common critiques of the *Alltagsgeschichte* movement in Germany. This statement also anticipates, to some degree, her later criticism of British Marxist historiography. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), cit. 78–79. A student of Clark's work may recognize in my hypothetical questioning above her reflections on the state of historiography in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See, in particular, her "The Territory of the Historian," in *History, Theory, Text*, 63–85.

[17] Stanley K. Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 238–56; Karen L. King, "Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21st Century," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, nos. 3–4 (2011): 216–37.

[18] Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 3.

writers not as rational actors but as something more akin to Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk*. Few if any disciplines that study the ancient Mediterranean describe their subjects as having such myopic concerns. Why, then, do we treat the gospels so idiosyncratically?[19]

While it is the case that writers compose their works with certain audiences in mind, the way scholars of early Christianity have emphasized the *religious* communities of these authors is at the very least parochial, if not ahistorical. Greek and Roman authors routinely describe themselves writing within (and for) literary networks of fellow *writers* – a competitive field of educated peers and associated literate specialists who engaged in discussion, interpretation, and the circulation of their works. These networks could include learned individuals from a variety of social backgrounds, but each member possessed the necessary training and the technical means for producing or publishing various forms of writing. Each was also bound by certain expectations and conventions of training, reading, composition, and literary exchange; while capable of innovation, they were still beholden to the dictates of genre, citation, and allusion in order to demonstrate knowledge of and engagement with other works within their literary field.

It stands to reason that the gospel authors were similarly trained and positioned, working within cadres of fellow, cultural elites.[20] Some of their associates may or may not have even had an understanding of being "in Christ"; the act of writing itself was the principle and guiding sphere of influence. In such a historical context, the gospel writers are not the "founding fathers" of a religious tradition – at least not in their historical moment. They are rational agents producing literature about a Judean teacher, son of God, and wonder-worker named Jesus. This particular subject matter offered numerous possibilities for employing literary techniques and motifs in conversation with other writings (and writers) of the milieu – including discourses on gods, Judean practices, philosophy, politics, and paradoxography. In short, the gospels represent the strategic choices of educated Greco-Roman writers working within a circumscribed field of literary production.[21] It is this social network of literate cultural producers that we should examine in our scholarship, aiming for

[19] On Christian exceptionalism, also see Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), passim.

[20] As I will explain, cultural elitism does not necessarily correspond to social and economic privilege in Greco-Roman antiquity.

[21] Here I am invoking the language of Pierre Bourdieu, which features prominently in Chapter 3.

descriptions that are both practical and plausible given the kinds of social engagement and expertise we know to be typical of such specialists. To be clear, I am not advocating that we exchange one "community" (a gospel community of early Christians) for another (a community of writers); rather, I am offering a critique of how the term "community" has been ascribed to these particular writings historically. Moreover, the social formations of readers and writers that I describe, and for which I offer abundant evidence, are not the idealized communities of the Romantic imagination. I replace a notion of community that lacks effective utility in social analysis, and is supported by little or no historical evidence, with a model widely deployed in historical and sociological scholarship.

Likewise, the rhetorical claims, themes, and narrative structure of the Synoptic gospels are artifacts of certain traditions of imperial-age *literature*, and not evidence of their reliability and "incomparable uniqueness" as religious texts.[22] It may no longer be novel to say that the gospels were not sui generis literature in the first and second centuries, but this has not stopped the field from largely treating them – and their authors – as if they are exceptional.[23] To illustrate this point, apropos of Jefferson, we know that the gospel writers are heavily influenced by the Middle Platonists, Stoics, and other popular philosophies of the period; yet philosophical terminology and allusion (e.g., *eidos*, *pneuma*, *logos*, *pistis*) are still often translated with Western Protestant Christian theological vocabulary (e.g., "spirit").[24] We know that attributing authorship to divine forces or authorial anonymity are common rhetorical habits in this period, but when this occurs within the gospels, the tactic is associated with the adaptation of an oral tradition, memory, or "collective authorship."[25] We know Greek and Roman authors routinely offer fanciful paradoxographical or topographical descriptions of their subjects in order to indicate (most often falsely) firsthand knowledge; for the gospels, these references are often taken as literal in some measure (e.g., contact with

[22] Stanley K. Stowers, "Kinds of Myths, Meals, and Power: Paul and Corinthians," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 105–14, cit. 105.

[23] For more on the history of this tendency in the field, see Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 252–91.

[24] See Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[25] Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 11.

"eyewitnesses" in Luke's preface).[26] Scholars have long noted parallels between the canonical gospels and works like the Greek novel or the *Satyrica*, including the shared *topoi* of ritual anointing, crucifixion, a disappearance off the cross, a cannibalistic fellowship meal, (implied) resurrection, and the motif of the empty tomb; yet comparisons between these ancient *corpora* are few and far between.[27]

Our narrow approaches are largely a function of the subsequent use of the gospels as documents of Christian origins. Others have described this inclination as the New Testament's domination by the "internal perspectives of Christian theology" or "academic Christian theological modernism."[28] Because Christianity has exerted such a strong influence on Western politics, philosophy, and ethics, there is a tautological tendency to view the so-called early Christians as being "just like us." This view was concretized by scholarly practices like *Religionsgeschichte* and the idea that the gospels represent a retrievable and embedded "folk culture" – that the gospels are texts written "by and for the people," so to speak.[29] Whether conscious or habitual, this interpretive anachronism unmoors New Testament writings from their historical context in service of later theological needs. As a result, we perpetuate a still-extant mythology about the rapid institutionalization, diversity, cohesion, and unparalleled origins – the "Big Bang" – of the Jesus movement. We also reach for details on the social world of a community of people – early Christians – not sustained in the text, while functionally ignoring the one social network we can concretely examine from a historical standpoint, that of ancient writers. I discuss these issues of translation and interpretation further in Chapters 1 and 2.

Such readings are reinforced when a work lacks literary refinement, thus inviting associations between it and the interests of nonliterate practices or social formations (e.g., oral tradition and "churches") or obscure or particularized forms of writing (e.g., *hypomnēmata*). These kinds of associations may well be category mistakes born of modern

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[26] On the generic conventions of ancient approaches to geography, see, e.g., Richard F. Thomas, *Lands and Peoples in Roman Poetry*, Cambridge Philological Society Supp. Vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1982).

[27] Notable exceptions: Ilaria Ramelli, "The Ancient Novel and the New Testament: Possible Contacts," *Ancient Narrative* 5 (2007): 41–68; Richard I. Pervo, "Wisdom and Power: Petronius' *Sat.* and the Social World of Early Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 67 (1985): 307–25; Sławomir Poloczek, "Pusty grób Kalliroe i Chrystusa," *U schyłku starożytności - Studia źródłoznawcze* 13 (2014): 9–32.

[28] Stowers, "Kinds of Myths," 106.

[29] Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 269–70.

assumptions about class and economics that do not correspond with the ancient world. To argue that literacy is directly related to class in antiquity is itself something of an anachronism; high education and knowledge of *paideia* did not necessarily correspond to economic or social standing as we understand these categories today. As demonstrated by the satirical *deipnosophistae* or the *Satyrica*'s Trimalchio, participation in dominant literary culture did not guarantee that one possessed the ability to read and write. Likewise, one did not necessarily require wealth, high class, or even free status to be a literate cultural producer, as was the case with Epictetus, a former slave. And certain genres of writing (e.g., *commentarii*) are not firm predictors of the education, relative skill, or elitism of an author.[30] Thus, scholars who speculate that the gospels clearly represent collective authorship, memoranda, or the work of less-educated or socially marginal writers are speculating beyond the limits of our evidence. More often than not, these interpretations take the gospels' descriptions of the humble, illiterate masses, rural non-elites, and imperial resisters as representative of the prototypical "early Christian." That the gospel writers might actually represent Roman literary elites writing about supernatural interests and foreign and bucolic landscapes and peoples seems contrary to how we have imagined Jesus' followers for millennia. But this idealized version of the early Christian story confuses the subject matter of the gospels with their authors.

In a similar vein, certain rhetorical approaches deployed in the gospels contribute to the notion that they are somehow exceptional. These writers tell us that Jesus is divinely authorized through his birthright, teachings, and wonder-working as a son of God – a powerful figure, even if a social underdog. He is portrayed in turns as a riddler and purveyor of esoteric knowledge or an ethical teacher and miracle-worker. And, unlike the notable statesmen, poets, and philosophers who populated civic biographies, Jesus' extraordinary wit and otherworldly superpowers reveal his authority and status. In combination, these features communicate that Jesus is an unparalleled figure and suggest that the gospel genre is an innovative departure from previous literary forms. Yet when compared

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[30] See Richard Last, "The Social Relationships of Gospel Writers: New Insights from Inscriptions Commending Greek Historiographers," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37, no. 3 (2015): 223–52, and Andrew M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 134: "One of the most striking things about the *commentarius*, in contrast to most literary genres of antiquity, is its wide range of authorship. Known writers are spread broadly in time, space, and social status."

with other first-century literature, the Jesus of the gospels can be fruitfully compared with the Cynics, Aesop, the pastoral heroes of the Greek novel, or witty underdogs in the biographical tradition, the subject of Chapter 5. Moreover, many of the *topoi* used by the gospel writers convey Jesus' special standing, but they do so through familiar literary allusions – the empty tomb, for instance, is found throughout Greek and Roman litera-ture and material culture (e.g., the novel and numerous paradoxographi-cal fragments) to indicate supernatural status. Even strategic omissions, like anonymity, are common tricks of the trade among imperial writers and can be understood without associations with memory traditions or communal authorship, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

It is certainly the case that the gospels present strong ideas about certain kinds of social formations – including communities of disciples and *ekklēsia*. If one takes for granted that these groups correspond with the author's social world in some measure, then it is little wonder that the field devotes so much attention to the idea of "Christian communities." Traditional approaches to the Synoptic gospels are instructive. The explo-sive growth of early Christianity in Luke is often taken as descriptive, not apologetic. Matthew lacks the same focus on institutionalization and rapid growth, but his sustained interest in group dynamics and an ideal Israel are taken as evidence of his lived aspirations. Mark makes an interesting contribution to this paradigm in that his ornery Jesus is more often misunderstood than revered; his account offers little in terms of communities and rapid institutionalization – this is, after all, the gospel that originally ended with the women fleeing from Jesus' empty tomb, bewildered and afraid, saying "nothing to anyone" (οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν; Mark 16:8). Yet discourse about communities and related early Christian social formations routinely get projected back onto Mark (e.g., the Mar-kan "community of the new age"),[31] thus revealing the idiosyncrasies of

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[31] See Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000). Dwight N. Peterson illustrates this confusion well in the case of the gospel of Mark: "Mark's community has not yielded a controlled field of interpretation. The reason for this is that virtually every scholar who discovers a Markan community behind the gospel – that is, the community for which the gospel was written, and which is supposed to serve as a control for a reading of Mark – discovers a different Markan community. The community behind the Gospel of Mark lived either before 70 [C.E.] or after 70 [C.E.], either in the tense times leading up to the destruction of the temple or in its immediate aftermath. It lived in Rome, or in Galilee, or in Southern Syria. It was a Gentile community, or a mixture of Jews and Gentiles or a Jewish community. Its interests were primarily to establish itself in opposition to a discredited Jerusalem Christianity . . . to forge a new, apocalyptic community . . . to steer a mediating political

the community-reconstruction method. Not every subject explored by an author represents something concrete about their social experience, but it can be illustrative of their training, interests, and narrative imagination. That the Synoptic gospels also contain similarities in content and subject matter can just as easily indicate competition between individual writers as it does shared memory traditions preserved by disparate groups of Christians. I focus on the Synoptics in this study for this reason.

Eventually placed together in circulation (or, more accurately, canon), the Synoptic gospels helped to construct a cohesive and legitimizing history for Christianity. Accounts of healings, resurrections, miraculous mass conversions, and angelically abetted prison breaks in the Acts of the Apostles fortified this remarkable chronicle of the origins and development of Christianity. Miraculous beginnings and powerful figures communicate a demand to be taken seriously. When laying claim to a storied past, only "august roots" will do.[32] Indeed, Acts' treatment of Paul as the miracle-working apostle to the Gentiles and authoritative founder of a number of early Jesus movement *ekklēsiai* reinforced the idea that early Christianity was institutionally sound and widespread. Paul as figurehead and martyr would carry through later writers such as the authors of the Pastoral Epistles, the Acts of Paul, Marcion, and Irenaeus, despite the fact that Paul's own letters reveal that his activity stood on far more contested ground – in 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul attempts to evoke a sense of unity among his addressees by invoking rhetoric about established groups.[33] It does not follow that this supposed group was, in fact, cohesive. Yet the "churches" and other communities described in Paul and

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path between Roman imperialism and Jerusalem hegemony ... to distance itself from Judaism in the Roman imagination because of the recent destruction of the temple ... to forge a new myth of Christian origins out of a variety of disparate traditions ... to explain to Mark's Jewish-Christian community why the temple was destroyed and replace Israel with Mark's Jewish-Christian community in God's plan." See Dwight N. Peterson, *The Origins of Mark: The Markan Community in Current Debate* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 152.

[32] See William E. Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2011): 193–215, cit. 199: "even modern groups seeking to define themselves and their identity in the *present* do so by inventing or laying claim to an ancestral identity which unifies, identifies, and gives them august (or respectable, or congenial) roots" (emphasis in original).

[33] As the sociologist Rogers Brubaker cautions: "We must ... take vernacular categories and participant's understandings seriously, for they are partly constitutive of our objects of study. But we should not uncritically adopt the engaged *categories of ethnopolitical practice* as our *categories of social analysis*." Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10 (emphasis in original).

Acts remain *the* model for understanding early Christian social networks in the first century. This includes the authors of the gospels and related writings (e.g., Q, John, the Gospel of Thomas).

Collated and canonized "Christian" writings have come to tell an origin story for the Jesus movement – "instant-aging" Christianity – creating a foundation from which to claim continuity.[34] In other words, writings like the gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters, placed in combination, have invented a tradition.[35] Following a long process of consensus-building, the writings of the New Testament are considered the representative account of Jesus' life, the Jesus movement, Paul's mission, and the founding of the early church. We are aware of the historiographical issues that attend the gospels; few scholars debate that these are documents written at least one or two generations after Jesus' death. Yet even one of the most widely used textbooks in the field places its discussion of the gospels before the letters of Paul, inferring that they represent a reliable history of some kind.[36] Oral tradition theory has helped create a justification for this approach; if the gospel writers are recording the oral, folk traditions of the early Christians, at least some of these details or sayings must be "genuine."[37] Likewise, if the most formative group for the gospel writer is his community of fellow Christians, then the content of these writings is not unduly sullied by "outside" literary influences or competition. One strategy that helps maintain this thesis is the speculation that the gospel authors are including certain stories or teachings to serve the religious community for which they are presumed to be writing. These approaches read the gospels as particular kinds of social history that have more to do with present interests than the usual processes for writers in antiquity. Uniting these texts into a conceptual whole has also had the effect of creating narrative coherence and a historical trajectory out of

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[34] Willi Braun, "Schooled Intelligence, Social Interests, and the Sayings Gospel Q," paper presented at Westar Seminar on Christian Origins, Santa Rosa, CA, October 2007, 55. Cited from Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 201.

[35] The phrase "invented tradition" or "the invention of tradition" stems from the work of Eric Hobsbawm, which is discussed further below. See Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1. I am referencing Hobsbawm in a somewhat narrow sense in this section. For a critique of his larger project and Marxist influence, see Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 83–85.

[36] Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[37] This is the central task of organizations like the Jesus Seminar, which seeks to identify which of these sayings or passages are most likely authentic.

what was otherwise an amorphous beginning. Read through a lens that perpetuates Christianity's own myth of origins, we no longer easily understand the gospels as "normal" ancient literature produced by educated, elite members of Greco-Roman society. The theological and ideological aims of subsequent generations have reinforced that we read these works as affirming community, cohesion, conversion, and stability.

By establishing a more historically plausible context for the writers of the gospels, this monograph opens up numerous possibilities for reimagining their social worlds. This includes offering a more concrete description of their probable writing processes, an expanded view of possible conversation partners within their literary networks (both Christ-followers and not), a broader range of literary *comparanda*, and a new view on how to classify the gospel genre. To this end, I situate these writings within the biographical tradition of Greco-Roman literature, which commonly features a marginal or subversive figure forced to succeed through the use of their wits or wonder-working skills. By bringing so-called early Christian texts into closer conversation with the larger canon of ancient Mediterranean literature and literary practices, my project traverses an artificial divide that has persisted for generations between academic disciplines that study ancient texts. When compared side by side, the *bioi* (lives) written by the gospel authors are no more remarkable than writings like Lucian's *Demonax*, the *Satyrica*, other Greek and Roman novels, or later works like Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (a.k.a. The Golden Ass), among others. Thus, I illustrate the need for our academic fields to reconsider why we classify certain texts either as part of religious canon or as Greek or Latin classics. Such reconsideration also invites us to examine any data we may have overemphasized or overlooked by implicitly retaining preconceptions about these texts.

This project also considers how New Testament scholarship has arrived at such idiosyncratic conclusions about the gospels and related works when compared with allied studies of classical literature. I begin this investigation by turning to German Romanticism and its influence on the critical study of biblical literature. Much like the efforts of the Brothers Grimm to reclaim a unified Germanic past through the oral stories of the common people or nation (*Volk*), scholars of early Christianity interested in trying to understand the social roots of the Jesus movement have treated the gospel writers like the Romantic Poet chronicling the spontaneous and miraculous origins of a people. I identify the trajectory within the field that has allowed this interpretative model to

perpetuate, reaffirming the second-century invention of Christianity featured in texts like Acts and the discourses of the church fathers.

Overall, my critique demonstrates that, if we want to describe accurately the Jesus movement of the first century, new scholarly approaches are needed that focus on the practices, motivations, and social interests of the gospel authors qua authors, not on how these writings are reliable chronicles of the historical Jesus. The following five chapters offer various alternatives to our traditional methods for reading Christian literature. After laying out the problématique in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 questions how New Testament scholars came to read the gospels as records of "oral traditions" about Jesus and argues that, unlike allied fields like classics, they have not yet come to terms with their intellectual inheritance from Romantic understandings of the author. Chapter 3 offers an overview of what we know about Mediterranean book culture and literary networks and demonstrates how a focus on the "habitus" of writers (and away from religious "communities") opens up numerous possibilities for rereading the gospels as imperial literature. Along these lines, Chapter 4 posits that many seemingly unique elements of the gospels are fully intelligible within the context of other first-century Greco-Roman writing strategies. I highlight three features in particular. First, I argue that the gospels' descriptions of Judea engage a familiar literary trope that looks to exotic or bucolic settings to discuss the relative virtues and vices of Roman imperialism. I suggest that this kind of literature often appears in the aftermath of military conflict, which helps explain the emergence of – and general interest in – the gospels following the Judean War.[38] Second, I reexamine several *topoi* central to Jesus' *bios* (e.g., crucifixion, empty tomb, fellowship meals) and establish that they are well attested elsewhere in first- and second-century literature, including the often overlooked *Satyrica*. Finally, I argue that the gospels engage in a certain "anti-intellectualism" that denies traditional *paideia* in favor of supernatural inspiration, offering examples of other writers making similar claims – particularly when their subject matter includes talk of the gods, pastoral or "natural" locations, or rural people. Chapter 5 builds on this approach by mapping out how one can understand the gospels as a form of "subversive biography" that inverts the expectations of civic lives by focusing on social underdogs who get by on their wits and/or

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[38] This is a subject I explore in more detail in Robyn Faith Walsh, "IVDAEA DEVICTA: The Gospels as Imperial 'Captive Literature,'" in *The Bible and Class Struggle*, ed. Robert Myles (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 89–114.

wonder-working, rather than military strength or brawn (e.g., *The Alexander Romance*, Aesop). In combination, these literary strategies help us understand why the subjects of Judea, Judaism, Jesus, and his death were interesting to imperial writers and ultimately compelling to a broad audience – without invoking the language of (or assumptions about) Christian communities.

PREMISES AND DEBTS

Any study that combines close reading of primary texts with metacriticism of its field is charged with certain influences and assumptions. Among the various premises that this project takes for granted, a few stand out that may strike my readers as somewhat unusual. First, because I am advocating for an approach to these writings and history that foregrounds concrete data without appealing to inherited assumptions and methods to "fill in the blanks," this monograph accounts for Christian beginnings from the perspective of Occam's razor: What is the simplest solution given the evidence we have at our disposal? This approach includes consciously limiting ourselves to analysis and comparison using what is patently in front of us without aspirational appeals to imagined communities, diversity, social formations, and processes. For the gospels, we have knowledge of Roman writing practices, the relative education levels and social networks of writers, and we have Greek texts written during the imperial period. Therefore, I treat the gospels as one would any other literature of this era.

Given the above, I focus almost exclusively on evidence for education and writing practices from elite Roman book culture. This decision is largely due to the fact that we do not have enough extant evidence for educational training from outside this cadre (e.g., among Pharisees) without appealing to much later material. Historians of education tend to rely on the accounts of Quintilian, Seneca, Pliny, and Plutarch to help reconstruct these practices. My study does not diverge substantially from this data set, although I do, on occasion, turn to Paul and Philo as "case studies" in order to add their literary activities to a body of evidence from which they are traditionally excluded. I also cite data from material culture in order to contextualize the technical processes of writing. I maintain throughout that we must not confuse elitism with social capital per se – as noted previously, there is no firm connection between education and class in antiquity. Many of our extant authors were, in fact,

slaves, freedmen, or born into humble circumstances (e.g., Antisthenes, Cleanthes, Epictetus); similarly, many figures with high status were what we might term illiterate (e.g., Tiberius' astrologer, the oracle at Colophon). In this respect, when I speak of "elite cultural producers" or "literate cultural producers," I do not necessarily mean the ruling classes or aristocracy in the strictest sense.

Ultimately, my goal is to offer a more thoroughgoing account of what it took to be able to read and write in the imperial period in order to demonstrate that it was a labor-intensive and specialized skill. Recognizing literacy and the production of literature in this manner also helps avoid the false impression that I am projecting onto the past the assumptions and models of the present; in other words, I am aware that the networks of writers I am proposing look, to some extent, suspiciously like the educated elites, professionals, and academics who are of a background and disposition to be interested in this subject and this book. Literacy, specialization, and the ability to publish may have been the purview of few, statistically speaking, in the ancient Mediterranean world, but the composition of a literary network had the potential to be as socially diverse as the model found in the fanciful Scipionic Circle: a former slave and his charges, an educated solider, interested members of the aristocracy, a competitive playwright, and a Stoic. Unfortunately, our ability to reconstruct the exact contours of the literary circle of the gospel writers is fraught with some difficulty. This leads me to my second caveat.

I understand the gospel authors as creative writers dynamically engaging with their subject matter; they are not biographers or historians as we understand the categories today. As such, there is only so much we can determine in terms of their motivations, conversation partners, audiences, and so forth. What I offer here are educated guesses as to their social location and sources, but I am also content with the possibility that we are limited in what we can reliably know or reconstruct. This means I will not be speculating about these writing groups beyond what we know was typical for the age and what the gospels themselves reveal about known *topoi*, rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, and so forth. Such ambiguity may strike some of my readers as uncomfortable or unfulfilling – particularly for a field largely built on attempting to reconstruct "origins," as I discuss in my Preface. For example, when I argue in Chapter 4 that the author of the *Satyrica* is a member of Pliny's intellectual circle and perhaps aware of Christians and/or the Synoptics, I do not insist that this is the only way to read the *topoi* that these sources share. Given the current state of what survives, and what we know about the

dating of these texts, it is futile to make a firm determination in one direction or another. I endeavor not to stretch these works beyond what the evidence allows. This includes being extremely cautious about not replacing speculation about one group (i.e., "the Christian community") for another (i.e., "networks of authors") without justifying my position on the basis of available historical data.

Moreover, when I scrutinize categories like "religion" or "community" it does not signal that I think these concepts are not useful to us or must be disregarded entirely. When I describe religion as a second-order category in Chapter 1, I do so in order to demonstrate that religion, when clearly and discretely defined, can help us avoid zero-sum understandings of social practices like writing about supernatural subjects (e.g., the gods or their sons). Writers need not be a part of a religious community in order to write about Jesus, for example, but they must be a part of a social network that is in a position to circulate or publish their works. Whether such a network also counts among its members what we might call "Christians" in part or in full is something the field will continue to interrogate. What I am proposing is that we step away from assuming that hypothetical *religious* communities are the sole or most formative influences on our authors, particularly given what we know about writing practices. Similarly, I do not have a problem with the term "community" per se. What I resist is the conceptual baggage we have inherited from German Romanticism that tends to associate the gospel writer's "community" with religious, illiterate, and socially marginal *Volk* like the characters that populate the gospels themselves. I map this inheritance, its fault lines, and its perils in Chapter 2. Thus, what I am proposing are alternative social networks that take the elite cultural producers who were necessarily a part of the production of the gospels into account. Redescribing the gospels not as folk tradition but as normal ancient literature opens us up to an entirely different history for these texts, one grounded in data, not theological hope.

On the subject of terminology and classification, my readers will also note that I use the terms "writer" and "author" (and their variants) more or less interchangeably. A recent move in the field questions the degree to which the term "author" is anachronistic. These critiques suggest that "the author" is a modern category born of assumptions about the degree to which any piece of writing is considered "bound" or "finished"; thanks to the printing press, we possess a contemporary bias for "the book" and see all forms of writing through this prism when there are ample examples

from antiquity of unauthored or "less finished" forms of writing.[39] Inspired by poststructuralist anti-authorialism, "the author" is considered a construct and distinct from the writer – writers perform acts of writing while the author is a product of discourse. Directly related to the "death of the author" debate of the twentieth century, this approach has been roundly critiqued within literary theory for the ways it wrests agency away from the author as a rational actor, foregrounding the reader and language in the process, and ultimately attributing authorship to amorphous and fuzzy signifiers like *audience*, *readers*, *communities*, *culture*, or to later redactors who are still not properly *authors*. I critique this approach in Chapter 2 when I discuss how the "death of the author" debate reinforces the Romantic idea of the author-genius as the mouthpiece of the collective and reinforces the notion that cultures write texts, not people. In short, ignoring the role of the author in a work's composition and reception allows the scholar to create a king worthy of the killing; a lack of specificity about the technical aspects of writing allows the "author" to be replaced with whatever social construct, literary form, or hypothetical audience works best for the scholar's ideal analysis.[40] In the case of the gospels, it allows for communities, redactors, oral speech, and so on to function as the primary authorial agents. Consequently, if one assumes that something like oral speech is responsible for the content of the gospels, this will dictate the processes by which the scholar imagines the text in question was created (e.g., recorded memory tradition). It is a distinction without a difference from the usual approaches employed in early Christian studies that evoke communities as authors.

Also, because I am challenging what I term "Christian exceptionalism" in this book, I do not capitalize the word "gospel" unless in direct reference to the name attributed to a specific piece of writing (e.g., the Gospel of Mark). This move consciously violates the recommendation of a number of style guides that indicate that the term be lowercase only in reference to the literary genre; however, not emphasizing these works in

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[39] Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, which relies heavily on the model established by Mroczek. I also discuss Mroczek's work in Robyn Faith Walsh, "Revisiting Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans: Rejected Literature and Useful Books," to appear in volume dedicated to François Bovon, ed. Brent Landau et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), forthcoming.

[40] See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 25.

any way that reinforces that they are set apart or intrinsically unique is at the core of my methodology and literary analysis. In most cases the term "gospel" will refer to the Synoptic gospels (my primary object of study).

Finally, this monograph represents a new conversation in the field. It is itself a beginning that suggests we can give writings like the Synoptics new life if we are willing to consider influences and social networks outside of religious communities, Christian history, collective memory, and the like. Remaining attentive to how and why we have made assumptions about communities helps us see past the accretions that faith, tradition, and inherited interpretation have deposited onto these materials. Such attention permits us to reassess the gospel writers on their own terms – what Jefferson illustratively described as seeking "diamonds in a dunghill." By incorporating these writings back into the panoply of ancient Mediterranean literature and practice, our future directions are bountiful.

1

The Myth of Christian Origins

Truly it is a good thing to have heard a bard (ἀοιδοῦ)

Such as this, resembling the gods in voice (θεοῖς ἐναλίγκιος αὐδήν).

For I say there is no more graceful end (τέλος χαριέστερον)

Then when joy (ἐυφροσύνη) holds the entire people (δῆμον),

And guests (δαιτυμόνες) throughout the halls listen to a bard,

Sitting in rows, and the tables beside are filled

With grain and meat, and the cupbearer (οἰνοχόος), drawing wine

From the mixing vessel (κρητῆρος) carries it about and pours it into cups.

This seems to me the most beautiful (κάλλιστον) of things.

(*Odyssey* 9:3–11)

Analyzing Odysseus' speech on the art of poetry, Bruce Lincoln suggests that the "ideological justification and idealized self-representation" embedded in the speech's meta reflection is "a myth about myth: a story poetry tells about itself as a means to define, defend … romanticize … legitimate, exaggerate, mystify, modify and advance its own position."[1]

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[1] See Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21. For a more in-depth examination of ancient discourses on poetry, see Peter T. Struck, "The Genealogy of the Symbolic," in *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1–20. Struck also addresses the influence of Romanticism on contemporary understandings of poetry and allegory in "The Symbol among the Romantics," in *Birth of the Symbol*, 272–77.

The concept of myth is multivalent; however, Hesiod's meaning of *mythos* is instructive: "an assertive discourse of power and authority … to be believed."[2] Whether from the edge of Thomas Jefferson's razor or Acts' portrait of the first century, *mythos* on the history – and prehistory – of early Christianity is ideologically freighted.[3] If the gospels and Acts function as myths that Christianity tells about itself, scholars must be careful not to reinscribe those myths as history. Or, as Lincoln irreverently states in his epilogue: "If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes."[4]

One idealized representation of early Christianity that is continually retold is that there were no authors before the second century CE. That is to say, scholarship on early Christianity tends not to ascribe autonomous authorship to writers until the second century. For first-century CE texts like the Synoptic gospels, authorship is often described using the language of community.[5] Even if an individual writer or redactor is acknowledged, the author is imagined to be functioning within and for a group of fellow Christians akin to the illiterate and socially marginal Christ followers found in the gospels themselves. In such scholarship, these so-called primitive Christians are remarkably cohesive and uniform in their concerns: the apocalyptic Markan community living in exile, the Jewish-Christians in Matthew breaking with the local synagogue, the Lukan community's loyalty to Paul.[6] The collective memories – the oral traditions – of these groups are recorded by their spokespersons and reinforced in each gospel with talk of ideal social formations or presuppositions about cohesion. Rarely considered are the technical and

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[2] Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 17.
[3] My reference to Thomas Jefferson here recalls my Introduction.
[4] Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209.
[5] Because the community approach is so pervasive, it would be tedious to list multiple examples. Some useful representative pieces that discuss this problématique (with bibliography) include John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Dwight N. Peterson, *The Origins of Mark: The Markan Community in Current Debate* (Boston: Brill, 2000), esp. chapter 5, "What Gospels Do: A Critique of Markan Community Construction," 151–94; Erin Roberts, *Emotion, Morality, and Matthew's Mythic Jesus* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Richard S. Ascough, "Matthew and Community Formation," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 96–126; Luke Timothy Johnson, "On Finding the Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Essay," in *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 129–43.
[6] The concept of the "primitive Christian" is discussed at length in Chapter 2 with examples from scholarship.

practical processes involved in producing literature in the imperial period – at least, apart from justifying the existence of these imagined communities. Prevailing Roman book culture dictates that the gospel writers were educated elites working within social networks of similarly positioned cultural producers. And the content of their writings reveals deep engagement with contemporary literary tropes and trends of that book culture, not the common "traditions" of an unacknowledged religious community.

This chapter reexamines this pervasive "community" framework for understanding the social world of early Christianity. Sometimes referred to as the "Big Bang" theory of Christian origins, it is characterized by three predominant assumptions: that the early Jesus movement grew explosively, that it was well established institutionally, and that its followers comprised almost miraculously bounded communities.[7] Different early Christian texts have contributed to this (modern) myth of the early Christian Big Bang. However, this vision of the early Christian landscape reaches an apex with Acts and its origin story, detailing the miraculous founding, growth, and development of the Jesus movement.[8] The approach I outline in this chapter proposes an alternative to the Big Bang model. I begin by "rectifying our categories," which is to say, I reexamine

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[7] Some scholars who have used this terminology include N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 452; Burton L. Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 247; Michael F. Bird, "Sectarian Gospels for Sectarian Christians? The Non-Canonical Gospels and Bauckham's *The Gospels for All Christians*," in *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, ed. Edward W. Klink III (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 32; John S. Kloppenborg, "Greco-Roman *Thiasoi*, the *Ekklēsia* at Corinth, and Conflict Management," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011), 189. While each of these scholars uses the term "Big Bang," they do not all use it in the same way that I do in this chapter.

[8] The origin story of Acts is adapted and perpetuated by the Pastoral Epistles, Irenaeus, and others. Later leaders within the church would construct a similar kind of "miraculous founding" using stories of violence and martyrdom against early Christians. Tales of the Great Persecution were a mechanism for reconsidering (and amplifying) the role of "the Church" within its own early history. Moreover, self-styled historians such as Eusebius, claiming to rely on eyewitness accounts, chronicled the unjust persecution of emperors and other leaders, mobs, and rogue citizens against early Christians in order to herald the bravery, virtue, and obedience of these martyrs. For a recent study on these issues, see Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

scholarly vocabulary on the subject of early Christian social formations.[9] I also examine the notion of "invented tradition" in more detail with an analysis of the influence of second-century texts like Acts on our understanding of Christian origins.[10] This examination leads into a discussion of Paul and the shortcomings that attend adopting his "categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis" for the study of early Christianity.[11] Finally, I propose that our modern adaptation of the mythic Big Bang of Christian origins is informed, in part, by Romantic-era thinking on the inspired folk speech of primitive communities, which is also the focus of Chapter 2.

RECTIFYING OUR CATEGORIES: TERMINOLOGY, VOCABULARY, AND ANACHRONISM

Without attention to the motivations and operational categories of those who interpret early Christian writings, the field risks uncritically adopting

[9] "Rectifying our categories" involves a careful description of one's subject, divorced as much as possible from adopting traditional, and potentially misleading, *doxai*; comparison between the object of study and similar social phenomena from other time periods and/or cultural contexts, allowing similarities and differences to reveal further detail; a redescription based on the description and comparison performed that reflects on the seemingly simple questions the object of study evokes (e.g., what kinds of meals are Jesus people engaging in); and, finally, an approach that acknowledges that language is not disinterested and our descriptive terms require (re)examination. See Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," 1–35; Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 70–74; Stanley K. Stowers, "Kinds of Myths, Meals and Power: Paul and Corinthians," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 143.

[10] Dating Acts to the second century is not uncontested, with some scholars dating it to the late first century. I follow the arguments of Arnal and others, who suggest that Acts demonstrates a familiarity with the later works of Josephus, as well as the Pastoral Epistles and Polycarp, all dated to the early to mid-second century. See Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006); Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 236–52, cit. 237.

Also, my language in this study takes for granted that "Luke" authored Acts, although this is also contested. Whether or not the same author penned Acts, or an author closely imitated the literary form and style of Luke's gospel, it does not substantially alter my larger observation about the later "invention of tradition" for Christianity's origin myth. For more on the history of Luke circulating with Acts and its attribution to Luke (which begins as early as the late second century), see François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 9.

[11] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.

frameworks that are themselves artifacts of the scholar's milieu and not that of the object of study. Any examination of the ancient world must necessarily include an evaluation of the history of vocabulary – not only the vocabulary of the text in question but also the inherited vocabulary or "language" of Christian theology, the Enlightenment, and post-Enlightenment philosophy that we use to characterize and describe our sources. More than a Gadamerian *Wirkungsgeschichte* that seeks the history of interpretation or effect of biblical texts at particular historical moments, such an approach is part and parcel of a larger project of redescription for the study of religion aimed at demystifying objects of study and treating social phenomena as ordinary human processes.[12] As discussed in the Introduction, we must approach early Christian writings not only as first- and second-century CE Mediterranean artifacts but also as artifacts of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century European thought.[13] Taking this caution into account entails contending with three interrelated obstacles that impede proper analysis of our historical data: terminology, translation, and anachronism.

Our analyses and descriptions of the ancient world are thrown off course with the use of categories and terminology that are representative of the *scholar's* social world and not that of antiquity. Recalling the Introduction, when Thomas Jefferson makes continual references to the "Platonizing Christianity" of the gospel writers, for instance, he is doing so through a particular lens. This terminology is specific to Enlightenment-era concerns about the Hellenization of early so-called Jewish Christians and Jefferson's own anti-Catholic anxieties. The word "Platonism" acted as a stand-in for "the generic notion of 'heathen' or 'pagan idolatry' or … that of 'superstition' employed with respect to Catholic cult practices in the early reformers."[14] This anti-Trinitarian fervor led Jefferson to conclude that the teachings of Jesus had been corrupted by "his inept and superstitious biographers," "conniving

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[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 300–2.

[13] J. Z. Smith raises this same issue in the case of the "J" and "Q" sources in *On Teaching Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30. This paradox is also crystallized in the case of the hypothetical saying-source Q; Q is not a first-century CE "Palestinian artifact" but is quite literally an artifact of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

[14] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 17.

Platonists," and, later, "illogical Calvinists" and underhanded priests.[15] He bemoans:

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Jesus … too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build an artificial system which might … admit everlasting controversy, given employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power, and pre-eminence.… It is fortunate for us that Platonic republicanism has not obtained the same favor as Platonic Christianity; or we should now have been all living, men, women, and children, pell mell together, like beasts of the field or forest.[16]

In short, while Jefferson may have intended to use "Platonic Christianity" as a historical description, the terminology did not exist in antiquity and possessed strong pejorative connotations for Jefferson and his ilk. Even the category of "Christianity" requires analysis – particularly before being applied to sources, persons, or circumstances that do not explicitly claim the moniker (even then, taking such claims for granted is problematic). If scholars fail to recognize the ideological or conceptual baggage that can attend categories like these, it inevitably leads to imprecision and assumption. In many cases, such lemmas are folk designations that cannot be taken uncritically or literally.

Terms such as *origins*, *identity*, *experience*, *ethnicity*, *diversity*, and *community* are among the problematic signifiers that contribute to misleading descriptions of the ancient world.[17] Even *religion* is a fraught analytical category; the way it is employed in scholarship on the ancient world is necessarily anachronistic and is often enmeshed with modern

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[15] Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 189.

[16] Lester Jesse Cappon, ed., *The Adams–Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 433. For more on Jefferson's position on the corruption of Jesus' teachings and its implications for historical study and contemporary Protestant thought, see Richard, "Philosophy," in *The Founders and the Classics*, 168–95.

[17] On the concept of Christian origins, see Mack, *The Christian Myth*; William E. Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2011): 193–215. On early Christian "diversity," see Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): 185–226; Stanley K. Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, nos. 3–4 (2011): 238–56, cit. 243; Karen L. King, "Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21st Century," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, nos. 3–4 (2011): 216–37.

ideas of individual experience.[18] This incongruity has to do, in part, with the development of the term in Western intellectual history. A product of Enlightenment-era thinking, *religion* is largely understood in terms of private or personal belief and, thus, discussed as if wholly separate from other spheres of civic, legal, political, or other activity. As such, it has no neat equivalent in the ancient Mediterranean where activities involving the gods and other non-human forces permeated many facets of daily social life. How should one classify, for instance, a binding spell (*dēfixiō*) that fails to invoke any specific deity[19] or haruspices called upon by Rome to interpret a loud noise heard on the outskirts of the city?[20] These classifications are further complicated when folded into questions of ethnicity. Juvenal, for instance, suggests that Judeans will "sell you whatever [interpretation] you want of a dream" (*qualiacumque voles Iudaei somnia vendunt*; Juv. 2.6.540) for a fee.[21] The *Satyrica* and, later,

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[18] Approaches to the study of religion (both ancient and modern) that focus on the question of an individual's personal experience have been roundly critiqued in the field on a number of fronts. Among the issues that arise from such studies is the tendency for scholars to treat the question of "experience" as an implicit category. By "implicit category," I mean to say a concept understood to be somehow innate to human beings and, therefore, highly subjective and often described in critical literature with mystifying language such as "belief" or "the sacred." Not only does such scholarship fail to achieve the kind of definitional clarity prized by history and the social sciences, its results tend to lack propositional content, therefore, risking simply reproducing the practitioner's own folk understandings of their activities, rather than treating them as objects of social analysis. See Robyn Faith Walsh, "Religion Is a 'Private Matter,'" in *Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés*, ed. Craig Martin and Brad Stoddard (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 69–82.

   Also see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 2 (1971): 131–40; Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179–98. On the anachronistic, Christian importation onto this analytical category, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 26–27; J. Z. Smith, "Bible and Religion," in *Relating Religion*, 197–215; Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). On religion as a discursive second-order category, see Stanley K. Stowers, "The Ontology of Religion," in *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (Oakville: Equinox, 2008), 434–49, cit. 436; Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112–28; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 154–59.

[19] Stephen G. Miller, "Excavations at Nemea, 1979," *Hesperia* 49 (1980): 196–97; *SEG* 30.353.

[20] In 56 BCE a loud boom was heard near Latium; Cic. *Har. resp.* 1.93; 2.26–53.

[21] Juv. 2.6.540.

Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* reference itinerant experts who offer various kinds of specialized interpretations and skills – the little Greek mathematician named Serapa "who knew the secrets of the gods" (*Graeculio, Serapa nomine, consiliator deorum*; Apul. *Met.* 76–77) or Zatchlas the Egyptian who animates avenging corpses (Apul. *Met.* 2.28). Such activities do not take place in conceptual or practical isolation but are a piece of a larger and more complex panoply of social engagement.

One strategy in recent years has been to dismiss the category of religion altogether as a tool for describing ancient data; if the ancients did not participate in activities that fit our contemporary notion of religion, then perhaps religion is not something that can apply to their practices and understandings.[22] But this approach fails to recognize the utility of the term as a category for scholarly use. By focusing on practices, religion can function as a taxonomy for specific kinds of action having to do with the supernatural (e.g., gods, non-obvious beings) and related anthropomorphisms (e.g., ancestors). Theorizing religion along these lines also recognizes it as a kind of human activity with particular contours that can be described and analyzed. Creating such second-order categories permits scholars to assess a variety of social practices in terms of their organization and how they are bundled with one another. In his work on the ontology of religion, Stanley Stowers suggests that "there are an unlimited number of ways that religious practices can connect with other religious practices and practices that are not religious," and the extent to

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[22] For example, see Brent Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope," *Numen* 55 (2008): 451: "If our reading of the textual and material evidence is correct, what the Romans did was not religion, at least not in the sense that the term is generally used. Ceding this point should in no way lower our opinion of the Romans; it should only reinforce the idea that Romans were different from us in this regard. In spite of this urge to grant the Romans religion, neither the appeals to ancient discussions of *religio* nor an expanded definition of religion is an effective means of claiming that Romans had the modern concept of religion." Nongbri would later soften this approach in his 2013 *Before Religion*. After rehearsing the history of the concept of religion from antiquity to the present, he effectively agrees with the earlier work of Jonathan Z. Smith and Stanley Stowers: "When Stowers writes that 'the definition [of religion] ought to be an explicitly second-order conception,' he seems to me to take for granted something very much like the arguments put forth in this book" (Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 158). He ultimately proposes disaggregating the term "religion" in order to "correspond better to ancient peoples' own organizational scheme . . . We will end up not with slightly tweaked books on ancient Greek religion or on Roman religion, but with books on Athenian appeals to ancestral tradition, Roman ethnicity, Mesopotamian scribal praxis," and so on (Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 159). Of course, the difficulty with Nongbri's proposal is that terms like "tradition" and "praxis" can be equally contested.

which *religion* is the predominant driver of a particular action would be "a matter of more and less."[23] Thus, an Etruscan haruspex called upon by the ruling elite to decipher an omen would be performing a state-sponsored action as an ethnic specialist in interpreting supernatural phenomena. The degree to which this specialist is performing a religious act would depend on context – again, a matter of "more or less." Exploring multiple social dimensions provides a much more thorough-going and dynamic understanding of our data. Such an approach is also sufficiently flexible so as to engage a range of time periods and cultural milieus, without the ideological and conceptual baggage that can attend studies bound by uncritical scholarly or folk categories of religion.[24]

Applied to the gospel writers, we need not deny that they may have had some firsthand knowledge of individuals or groups associated with the Jesus movement, but this would need to be demonstrated and not assumed. Moreover, any knowledge of or engagement with practices associated with the Jesus movement would need to be held in tension with other spheres of social influence, such as professional or political interests. It is these overlapping spheres of influence, training, and commitment that dictate how to account for the content of the gospels and not a vague or exclusive appeal to religious groups.

A theorization of religion along these lines has the additional purchase of revealing how categories of religion are routinely imagined as inextricably tied to self-evident and uniform social formations. Language that focuses on putative and bounded social groups has had enormous implications for early Christian studies. In terms of folk conceptions, acceptance of Christianity's later claims to cohesion is central to its Big Bang origin myth. Acts, for instance, makes continual reference to miraculous deeds inspiring spontaneous conversions – "the great number of the ones having believed (δέ πλήθους τῶν πιστευσάντων) were of one heart and one mind/soul (ἦν καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ)" (Acts 4:32) – resulting in the rapid development of Christian communities: "Fear (φόβος) came to every mind/soul (ψυχῇ), because many wonders and signs (τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα) were happening through the apostles. And all of the believing ones (πιστεύσαντες) were together and had all things in common (εἶχον ἅπαντα

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[23] Stowers, "The Ontology of Religion," 444.

[24] For more on religion as an emic category for scholars, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 10–12.

κοινά).... And from day to day ... the Lord (κύριος) added to the ones being saved (τοὺς σῳζομένους)" (Acts 2:43–47).

Even if one recognizes the extra-ordinary or fantastic nature of Christianity's founding and development in Acts, the "Christian community" remains a tantalizing prism through which to make sense of passages that employ language about groups. When Matthew invokes references to a chosen *ethnē* ("the kingdom of God will be ... given to a people [ἔθνει] producing the first fruits of the kingdom," Matt. 21:43; "go therefore and make disciples of all people [τὰ ἔθνη]," Matt. 28:19) or Luke speaks of the new Israel and the fate of the *oikoumenē* (Luke 2:1, 4:5, 21:26), it can be difficult to separate these claims from projections of social reality.[25] But the existence of religious groups cannot be uncritically accepted as they may be literary devices or simply aspirational; "what Paul and other writers thought some population had miraculously become and ideally ought to be is not good evidence for actual community."[26] Again, we must resist taking our subjects literally or adopting their self-descriptions as evidence of fact.

Building on this foundation, whenever social groups are invoked as normative in scholarship, we must question why. As with Jefferson's Platonizing Christians, we need to ask where and how we have inherited these terms and typologies. For contemporary studies of the New Testament and early Christianity, we must contend with our propensity for reinscribing classifications that are heavily influenced by German Romanticism. Chief among these is the concept of "community," which is rooted in anti-Enlightenment and Romantic notions of a cohesive *Volk* inspired by the "spirit" or *Geist* of a group's oral teachings. To assume that sources like the Synoptics emerged from the folk speech of established early Christian groups presumes a social environment for these writers that agitates against what is known about ancient authorship practices. It privileges a presumed social formation (religious communities) over an axiomatic one (networks of literate specialists) without demonstrating why such a move is warranted. Moreover, religion is not a matter of "more or less" in this scholarly construction; it is a matter of "only": the author's assumed religious community is the only considered social

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[25] On Luke–Acts as a "memory theater" for "a new (Christian) Israel," see Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church amid the Spaces of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 117.

[26] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community,'" 24.

context, leaving more plausible associations – like broad networks of elite cultural producers – largely unexamined.

Related to the question of terminology is the problem of theologically interested vocabulary affecting the translation of ancient sources. Similar to importing presumed or anachronistic social contexts onto historical evidence, translations have the potential to skew our understandings of an author's literary environment and strategic intentions. As a discipline, the act of translation itself presents numerous methodological challenges – this is arguably even more so the case with texts still used in contemporary religious practice. Just as religion can be a matter of more or less, when a word has present theological significance, it can be extremely difficult to divorce the concept from the way it functions in that religious discourse. For example, in recent years the translation of *ekklēsia* as "church" has been roundly critiqued; Jennifer Eyl, for instance, argues the term refers not to cohesive groups in the letters of Paul but the Septuagint's concept of the "day of the *[ekklēsia]*" and the processes by which gentiles are adopted into the kinship of Judea.[27] Such specificity is occluded when texts continue to carry the interpretive freight of subsequent generations. Terms like *ta ethnē* (pagan), *hamartia* (sin), *pneuma* (spirit), *pistis* (faith), and *metanoia* (conversion) are particularly susceptible to historically imprecise and, ultimately, mythologizing translations because of their role in later theological formulae. For early Christianity, anachronistic translations directly affect our understanding of the origins and social development of the Jesus movement. As Eyl explains, there is a great risk of inscribing "a later Christianized understanding of Christian beginnings" when certain kinds of language are treated as self-evident.[28] As such, rectifying or reexamining our categories includes attention to terminology that can reify anachronisms about the breadth and cohesion of those with an interest in Jesus in the first two centuries CE.

Correspondingly, there is no identifiable and stable origin for the movement that becomes known as Christianity. The designation of "Christian" for texts like the gospels is not representative of any social categorization or explicit claim made by the authors of these texts themselves. It is not an emic category, and the writers do not demonstrate a concrete awareness that they are participating in something we might call

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[27] Jennifer Eyl, "Semantic Voids, New Testament Translation, and Anachronism: The Case of Paul's Use of *Ekklēsia*," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26, nos. 4–5 (2014): 315–39.

[28] Eyl, "Semantic Voids," 316.

religion. In fact, many scholars have reasonably concluded that evidence for something like Christianity, distinct from Judaism, begins to emerge only in the second century CE.[29] Thus, it is unclear whether the gospels constitute a representation of Christian beginnings or Christian "origins" in anything but the weakest sense. It is not until the second century that actors invested in developing a coherent tradition for the history of Christianity begin to codify earlier "sources" as Christian. Given this, we must be cautious when using terminology that has the potential to reinscribe the kind of myth of origins found in Acts. By evaluating works like the gospels independent of their later role as narrative tokens of the early Jesus movement, we are able to better locate their content – and vocabulary – within the scope and tradition of Roman imperial literature.

THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

The relationship that develops between writings like the gospels and what comes to be known as Christianity in the second century represents an invented tradition. By "invented tradition," I mean the factitious development of continuity between an institution, state, or other social group and a historic narrative, ritual, symbol, or figure. Invented traditions are designed to link groups to "a suitable historic past"[30] and largely adhere to the following principles: "a) … establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) … establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) … whose main purpose was socialization, the

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[29] For example, Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 193–215.

[30] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1. In the case of practices, Hobsbawm describes a repetitive process of "formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past" – for example, the choice of Gothic-style architecture for the British parliament in the nineteenth century and then again in the rebuilding campaigns following the Second World War (Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 1–2). Other examples that appear in his edited volume *The Invention of Tradition* are the institution of the bagpipe and kilt as representative of Scottish heritage following the union of Scotland and England in the early eighteenth century or the reinstitution of the "traditional" English folk carol among "middle-class collectors" centuries after it had remained dormant and neglected; see Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," in *The Invention of Tradition*, 15–41. Certain elements of the following argument appeared in an earlier form in Robyn Faith Walsh, "Q and the 'Big Bang' Theory of Christian Origins," in *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Barry S. Crawford and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 483–491.

inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior."[31] This process of invention seeks to build a legitimizing foundation for present interests through reference to the past, whether that past be the adaptation of a particular ritual action (e.g., the horsehair wigs of English barristers), the elevation of a relatively marginal or subversive figure to the center of an august ancestral inheritance (e.g., Vercingetorix in France), or the reclamation of a previously neglected or forgotten artist or artwork, song, or writing as a representative cultural product (e.g., the collected folktales of the Brothers Grimm in Germany or the paintings of El Greco in Spain).[32] In antiquity, similar attempts at "laying claim" to status by making reference to the past are found in the divine genealogies of Roman emperors, the Atticisms of the Second Sophistic, the post-Aristotelian writings and biographies of Pythagoras, and later rabbinic collections of "oral Torah," to name a few.[33]

The search for Christian origins participates in an invention of tradition. The second century established a legitimizing history through first-century artifacts such as the gospels, letters, and figureheads like Paul and Peter.[34] By pulling these disparate stories, teachings, and characters together into a collective narrative, the compilers and redactors of the second century sought to develop a myth of Christian origins that was sufficiently unifying and novel so as to be worthy of a place among the panoply of already-established Mediterranean intellectual and religious traditions. To fail to recognize these efforts as the strategic maneuvers of later inventors or myth-makers – in other words, to believe Christianity's own myth of origins – is to begin our analyses from a limiting perspective that accepts the first-century Jesus movement as a recognizable and cohesive social formation. This kind of classification is both uncritical and misleading; as William Arnal notes: "we continue to speak and act as

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[31] Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 9. Also see Pascal Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), vii: "repetition or reiteration of tradition implies complex processes of acquisition, memorization and social interaction which must be described and explained."

[32] On Vercingetorix, see Michael Dietler, "'Our Ancestors the Gauls': Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe," *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 584–605. On the late influence of El Greco on Pablo Picasso, see Jonathan Brown, *Picasso and the Spanish Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) and John Richardson, "Picasso's Apocalyptic Whorehouse," *New York Times Review of Books* (April 23, 1987): 40–46.

[33] Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 200.

[34] Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 201.

though 'Christianity' represents a coherent, sensible, and informative classification for *what* we are studying when we study the writings of the New Testament, and this assumption continues to circumscribe what we regard to be thinkable."[35] Among the assumptions authorized by an uncritical acceptance of Christianity's myth of origins is precisely that the "Christianity" of the first century was spontaneous, cohesive, diverse, and multiple.

It is important to pause at this juncture to clarify that there are two distinct but related observations I am making about how tradition is invented for early Christianity and how the concept of community becomes a normative social construction. While the activities and interests of the second century inform how we have come to read the New Testament and other early Christian literature, this does not mean that we are unable to say anything concrete about the first century and, specifically, the social context of the authors of these texts. However, it does require that we disaggregate our approach to this literature from the model of *religious* community that has been so pervasive.

First, there is the active and ongoing process of invention and myth-making that begins in the second century CE. This invention takes place on numerous fronts, including the process of assembling a canon of literature with the joint circulation of certain texts. It also takes place through writings like Acts, which takes the figure of Paul and composes a narrative establishing continuity for the Jesus movement in the aftermath of Jesus' death. This strategy establishes Paul as a "pan-Christian hero":

Multiple gospels alongside the letters and Acts show that Paul is part of a larger story still, that of Jesus, and specify and elaborate the objects of his "faith." Bringing them all together both domesticates and authorizes the letters, verifies Acts, and interprets the gospels, which in their turn show us that Paul's community organizing and rule-making was *about* Jesus; and so gives us a picture whose whole is greater than the sum of its traditional parts.[36]

This, for all intents and purposes, "Hero-Paul" is not celebrated as a novel interpreter of the scriptures and philosopher. On the contrary: one of his speeches drones on for so long in Acts that he inadvertently kills a man who dozes off and falls out of a third-story window (Acts 20:9). Hero-Paul is a founder, a martyr, and a miracle worker. Biographical

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[35] Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 195.
[36] Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 206.

details about the man function as meditations on Paul's virtues and vices, explicated through minor details.[37]

More important to the author of Acts is to establish a life of Paul that "domesticates" him.[38] Acts spackles over the messiness of Paul's real-life mission – as evidenced in his letters – and instead offers him a prominent role on par with the disciples in the establishment of the Jesus movement. Acts also applies the Big Bang paradigm to this invented tradition in order to offer an account of the founding and development of "the church" through Paul. Crucially, as Paul was heralded as the founder of Gentile Christianity and its proto-orthodox communities, the idea of "Christian communities" became increasingly normative. And, as other second-century figures like Irenaeus began to circulate the gospels alongside Paul's letters, it added to a synthetic sense of Christian history whereby "[t]wo distinct *anthologies* are . . . juxtaposed, each imagined to comment on, and serve as an interpretive filter for, the other."[39] Thus, a reader of the gospels and Acts may turn to Paul's letters and accept that his addressees represented cohesive groups.

Recognizing this second-century invention of tradition helps scholars avoid some of the anachronisms, vague categories, and assumptions that have been the drivers of previous descriptions of Christian origins. The true origins of Christianity are in how its canonical texts were later collated, circulated, and established as authoritative, not in the mythic constructions we find described in the writings themselves.[40] In other words, we should not confuse the aspirations of the second century for

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[37] Acts demonstrates some awareness of Paul's letters – for example, in its description of his missionary activity (e.g., 2 Corinthians 11 and Acts 9; 1 Thessalonians 2–3 and Acts 17), the role of women in positions of leadership, the names of Paul's "co-workers," and certain linguistic and thematic parallels (e.g., Galatians 2 and Acts 15). Scholars have long agonized over the issue that, if the author of Acts was aware of Paul's correspondence, he often chose to ignore them. See, for example, Pervo, *Dating Acts*, 54–55. Also see a review of the debate and substantial bibliography in Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke–Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), esp. chapter 1, "The Date of Acts," 1–23. In my estimation, given that the ability to write literature or letters was the purview of so few in antiquity, and given what is evidently the wide circulation of Paul's letters, the author of Acts may have had only a few written materials at his disposal; therefore, I judge that it is reasonable to think that some of Paul's correspondence was among them.

[38] Arnal uses the word "domesticates" in reference to Irenaeus' use of the Areopagus speech in Acts 17:22–31 in *Ag. Her.* 14–15; Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 205, n. 25.

[39] Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 204. Emphasis in original.

[40] See Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 202.

the realities of the first. However, this theoretical approach has its short-comings if scholars fail to hold it in tension with the need to evaluate early Christian literature beyond imagined first-century communities. For example, some have looked to the letters of Paul and, continuing to misunderstand his talk of cohesive social groups as actual and not aspirational, suggest that we must class *all* of his letters as second-century forgeries.[41] In the case of the gospels, others have proposed that we pivot from attempting to speak of specific churches (e.g., the Lukan community, Matthean community, and so on) and instead reimagine the gospels as literature written for "all Christians" throughout the Empire.[42] There has also been a move toward suggesting that the gospels were "less 'bookish' texts" and akin to "memory more than writing" without true authors.[43] Each of these alternative approaches continues to assume a mystified and miraculous beginning for Christianity in which religious communities are regarded as normative, multiple, and cohesive.

Rather than begin by positing a religious community behind these works, a focus on literate practices dictates a new starting point that directly engages Roman book culture. While it is possible that the authors of the Synoptic gospels were associated in some measure with a group of persons either interested or actively participating in practices pertaining to the Jesus or Christ movement (e.g., meeting in assemblies, sharing in eucharist meals, praying together, interpreting sacred Judean texts), this ultimately remains conjecture. That these writings survive at all means that they circulated according to a set of discrete social conditions. Recent work by scholars like AnneMarie Luijendijk increasingly gives us a better idea of what these social conditions may have been, which I discuss further in Chapter 3.[44] With limited literacy rates, limited means of publication, and defined parameters of language and genre, we can speak of the gospel writers' literary networks with some specificity. Evidence for strategic literary decisions is evidence for engagement with particular

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[41] For example, Hermann Detering, "The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 3, no. 2 (1996): 163–93. This article first came to my attention through Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition,'" 203.

[42] Richard Bauckham, *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[43] Matthew D. C. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

[44] AnneMarie Luijendijk, "The Gospel of Mary at Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. L 3525 and P. Ryl. III 463): Rethinking the History of Early Christianity through Literary Papyri from Oxyrhynchus," in *Re-Making the World: Christianity and Categories*, ed. Taylor G. Petrey (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 391–418.

kinds of expertise and, therefore, particular kinds of interpretive networks. Stowers explains:

In antiquity, only a tiny fraction of the population was literate at all and a much smaller fraction literate enough to write and interpret literature. Networks or fields of writers, interpreters of writings, and readers educated in particular niches of the fields all formed highly specialized social arenas that produced and contested their own norms, forms of power, practices, and products of literacy. Banishing individual persons as writers from the account of Christian beginnings mystifies interests.[45]

Approaching the gospels in this way transforms them from *lives* documenting the theologies of each "church" or "community" into an individual author's account of the last days of a notable philosopher, such as the *Phaedo*, a collection of *chreia* in the style of *Demonax*, a depiction of the figure of Jesus as a teacher of ethics, or a Jesus as an epic hero establishing divine lineage and authority in style of the *Aeneid*, and so on.[46] Attention to the strategic literary decisions of these authors opens up entirely new avenues of investigation that focus on the sort of networks that fostered this kind of literature, not the type of mirror reading onto communities characteristic of Romantic methodologies.

Writing networks are not the social formations that scholars of the New Testament are typically looking for when they speak of seeking Christian origins in either the first or second century. Thus, some questions naturally arise from this approach; chief among them is how to make sense of the groups to which Paul is writing. After all, Paul is our earliest source for evidence of the Jesus movement. Are his letters not evidence that there are some recognizably Christian "communities" in the first century? Paul's letters offer an interesting case study in how assumptions about community have affected scholarship on Christian origins. Acts' "Hero-Paul" elevated him from one among many interpreters of sacred books in a competitive field of first-century religious specialists to

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[45] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community,'" 250.

[46] Scholars have already recognized parallels between the gospels and Q and literary forms like *chreiai* or dialogues like the *Phaedo*. What I am proposing is that by disaggregating these writings from notions of church or community, we are better able to consider why the authors of these texts are choosing to engage these particular forms of literature and, thereby, better explore their interests in exchanging these kinds of writings with one another. On Jesus as a teacher of ethics, see Erin Roberts, "Anger, Emotion, and Desire in the Gospel of Matthew" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2010). On Luke–Acts as epic, see Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke–Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

the founder of Gentile Christianity. However, a reexamination of the rhetoric of group dynamics in Paul's letters reveals that Hero-Paul is also a mythic construction.

"hero-paul": a case study

The New Testament, a product of second- and fourth-century development, constructs a myth of origins for Christianity that continues to be immensely influential in both theological and secular circles. The contours of this account are familiar: following Jesus' death, the disciples established the first church, and then, an apostolic mission of teaching and conversion spread the movement rapidly throughout the Empire. This missionizing activity culminated in the founding and development of the so-called early churches. Acts informs this perspective by continually invoking groupist rhetoric.[47] This tandem reading reinforces the idea that the practices, interpretive innovations, and writings of what comes to be known as Christianity emanated from an identifiable, powerful genesis. Implicit in this theory is the premise that Christianity materialized in a manner otherwise unprecedented in comparison with the origin stories of other "new religious movements."[48] Certainly, in order for there to have been thousands converted in a single day, as claimed by Acts 21:20, the growth rate of the movement would have to have been nothing short of miraculous.[49]

A similar account can be brought to bear on the letters of Paul – despite scholarship increasingly recognizing Paul's strategic license in constructing a myth of origins for his audience. While Paul boasts of the numbers of those "in Christ" (Rom. 12:5), it is far from clear that these people share a mutual awareness or acceptance of this designation. What is clear is that Paul was actively engaged in an ongoing struggle, both to obtain authority and to coalesce disparate social actors into a more cohesive unit. Among the many methods in his toolkit were the authority and interpretation of Mosaic law (e.g., Rom. 3–4; Gal. 3), appeals to popular

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[47] Acts brings this full story together. Paul's letters and Matthew are centrally "organized" by Acts in order to produce this narrative.

[48] I borrow the concept of "new religious movements" from Rodney Stark's work on Mormonism. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a comprehensive guide on the history of scholarship on so-called NRMs, see James R. Lewis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[49] Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 243.

philosophical motifs (e.g., Rom. 7; 1 Cor. 12), shared narratives on cultural decline (e.g., Rom. 1–3), instruction on the performance of particular ritual actions like baptism (e.g., Rom. 6), requests for sponsorship and funds (e.g., 2 Cor. 9), the use of highly charged conceptual categories such as *ekklēsia*, and moments of pique when news of quarrels and rupture seemingly goad him into invective (e.g., Gal. 3:1). Many of these rhetorical strategies are constituent of Paul's larger project of religious and ethnopolitical group-making. He proposes that God's *pneuma* is intrinsically shared among his addressees, binding them together.[50] The reception of his message appears to have varied. While Paul was corresponding with assemblies that may have self-identified as cohesive, his letters reveal that these associations were dynamic and variable rather than stable and organized.

In his work on estimating early Christian populations, Keith Hopkins avers that "most ancient observations about Christian numbers, whether by Christian or pagan authors, should be taken as sentimental opinions or metaphors, excellently expressive of attitudes but not providing accurate information about numbers."[51] Relatedly, Paul's continual use of language aimed at group formation can be understood as largely performative. When "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" reify categories like community, assembly, or congregation, it is often in pursuit of "*invoking* groups they seek to *evoke* … summon them, call them into being."[52] In other words, the deployment of certain categories in the course of constructing new social identifications may be part of a strategy for further fostering such relationships.[53]

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[50] See Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[51] Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 243.

[52] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 10. Emphasis in original.

[53] Following the critique of Rogers Brubaker on identity theory, the concept of identity "bears a multivalent, even contradictory theoretical burden" in the academy today (Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 35). For instance, in the case of issues of race, ethnicity, and nationality, the term can be a puzzling appellation when it is employed without a clear and defined rubric of complementary meaning and analysis. Some recent proposals for rectifying this issue have suggested using the term "identification," which encourages specificity as to the agents and practices involved in the act of identifying. Both relational and categorical acts of identification, in this sense, are "intrinsic to social life" in a way identity alone is not (Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 41). Language, gender, citizenship, and ethnicity would be examples of categorical identifications that call for analysis of the practices or other interplays involved in establishing self-understanding and/or persons or institutions ascribing categorization onto others. This

Paul's coaxing in Galatians 3 is a useful example: chiding his recipients collectively as fools and "bewitched" (3:1, 3), he launches into a series of rhetorical questions that serve as hopeful reminders that they are supposed to be one in Christ, unified by *pneuma*, their "experiences" (*pathē*) and miracles (3:4–5, 26–28). Paul then outlines his myth of origins for Gentiles baptized "in(to) Christ" – namely, that they are coheirs with Christ and adopted into the patrilineal line of Abraham (4:1–7). He is able to draw a new ethnic map for Gentiles that ties them back to a shared ancestor, which emphasizes their mutuality. Attendant practices such as ritual meals or baptism serve to affirm and inculcate these ties further. This newfound affiliation asks that its members recognize a kinship in both genealogy and shared *pneuma*.

Paul also continually emphasizes their participation in a fated, Empire-wide movement as he describes his own mission. In Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans he reminds his readers that he received the gospel from the risen Christ and not from human origins (e.g., Gal. 1:11–12; 1 Cor. 15:1ff.; Rom. 15) and that he has been tasked with winning "obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the powers of signs and wonders (ἐν δυνάμει σημείων καὶ τεράτων), by the power of the *pneuma*." Moreover, he claims that "from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum, I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ (πεπληρωκέναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον)" (Rom. 15:19). One can see the roots of the Big Bang paradigm amplified by Acts in such passages with their focus on supernatural motivation, exceptionalism, and expansion.

Paul's ethnically coded language demonstrates that individuals are capable of shifting their religious and ethnic identifications according to situational need.[54] For Paul – a religious and ethnopolitical entrepreneur functioning remotely in a competitive field – ethnicity is not a blunt instrument; it is an authoritative frame for achieving cohesion among participants, and one that calls for a sense of shared mind and practice. It does not necessarily follow that he was successful. Participants are capable of ranking their affiliations into hierarchies, establishing varying levels of association, breaking these associations altogether when prudent, or never fully grasping or accepting a message like Paul's.[55]

latter "mode" in particular I judge to be exceptionally helpful for thinking about religions.

[54] Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 118.

[55] Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 18; Hodge, "Negotiating Multiple Identities," in *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 117–36.

Even Paul variously calls upon his standing as a *Ioudaios*, a Pharisee, and one among the Gentiles (Gal. 4:3) when doing so proves advantageous (1 Cor. 9:20ff.). With such mutable social ties, it can be difficult to determine when information about a group is representative or rhetorical.

Despite a mounting scholarly awareness of Paul's precarious entrepreneurial undertaking, religious "community" – and the rhetorical implications of that term – remains a common framing for speaking about early Christianity. This can be attributed, at least in part, to our lack of concrete data; Paul's letters arguably represent our best insight into first-century *ekklēsiai*, and therefore, if we want to say anything at all about these associations, it is tempting to engage in an interpretive tautology that relies on Paul.[56] In such cases, his idealized portrayal of his audience as a community bounded by shared *pneuma*, participation in Christ, and moral perfection is accepted as genuine or actual. Scholars who uncritically accept Paul's letters as representative of established groups tend to question why and to what degree these early Christians are following the guidelines of their titular leader. For example, the Corinthian letters are often treated as "poster child[ren] for the danger of divisions in the community" and not evidence that this group was only loosely affiliated.[57] The Corinthians likely never possessed the kind of commonality in mind and practice characteristic of a community. Rather than accept that Paul was only variously successful in his attempts to coalesce those to whom he was writing, scholars often focus on the possibility that "outsiders" inveigled the Corinthians away from Paul's brand of proto-Christianity. This assumption trades on notions of orthodoxy and heresy, the initial acceptance of Paul's message, and spontaneous social organization.[58]

On the whole, the mass conversions and miraculously established churches of Acts tend to receive more scrutiny than Paul's *ekklēsiai*. It is not uncommon to find scholarship pondering the "Christ-believing influencers in the Galatian communities" muddying Paul's message among his

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[56] Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 46, discusses this circular reasoning in Romans.

[57] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community,'" 243.

[58] A similar point was raised by Iris Marion Young in her feminist critique of the concept of community: "The ideal of community, finally, totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations." See Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 302.

people.[59] In this construction, the Galatians are a formerly strong group that had been sullied by an outsider and made weak, underlined by moments in the letter in which Paul asks "to whom are you bewitched (ἐβάσκανεν)" (3:1) and "who prevented you from being persuaded by the truth (ἀληθείᾳ μὴ πείθεσθαι)"? (5:7).[60] Scholars seeking information about the composition of these communities will ask questions such as to what degree does the group consider themselves Gentile Christian or Jewish Christian. It is also common to find studies that hypothesize the existence of multiple Pauline communities in one location "in communication and cooperation."[61] Even if scholars disavow the aspirational or mythic account of Acts, acceptance of Paul's rhetoric about communities in Galatia – or Corinth, Philippi, and Thessaloniki, for that matter – reinforces the same myth of origins. This misstep with Paul reinforces the perils that attend taking any of our ancient authors literally without pausing to reflect on the strategic function of constructions like "community."

Among the problems with this approach, two concerns are particularly significant. First, as is often acknowledged when noting the occasional nature of Paul's letters, ancient letter writing was an activity conducted by social actors according to particular needs or in response to particular situations. Letters are not simply containers of information. They reflect social hierarchies, contain carefully crafted attempts at persuasion, and follow well-established rhetorical and literary conventions. As such, Paul cannot be spared from scrutiny with respect to the categories he employs in his descriptions of social relationships. Paul's descriptions of the *ekklēsiai* he addresses must be held in tension with his rhetorical claims.

Second, rather than gloss over messy processes like group formation, attention to individual acts – such as writing and what we know about the social networks that involve this kind of activity – provides an opportunity to establish a less mystified and more fine-grained historical analysis. Such an approach is not limited to "normative theological concepts parading as descriptive and explanatory social concepts" but is based on what is customary for the era and subject in question.[62] In the case of

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[59] Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 138.
[60] I am using adapted language from Mary Douglas. On "Group/Grid" dynamics, see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[61] Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians*, 30.
[62] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community,'" 245–46.

Paul, he is one among a number of figures touting themselves as specialists in textual interpretation, divination, and other so-called religious practices. An investigation along these lines would situate Paul in a highly competitive field of self-styled apostles, super-apostles, and so forth, illuminating a dynamic social landscape for the early stages of the Jesus movement in which something like the cohesion of the participants would need to be demonstrated.[63]

DEMYSTIFYING EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

The gospel writers' interest in social formations – if they possess any such interest at all – does not offer a plausible account of the development of the Jesus movement(s) into what is now called Christianity. Indeed, concerns about the boundaries of normative Christianity are more akin to debates about orthodoxy and heresy that emerge in subsequent centuries of Christian history.[64] A brief survey of Q and the canonical gospels – the texts that traditionally constitute early Christianity's myth of origins – demonstrates very little by which to trace the development of the social practices that must have constituted the institutionalization and spread of Christianity.

The hypothetical sayings-source Q is often cited by scholars as a genesis for the Big Bang, a now-lost source used by Matthew and Luke that may have dated back, in some proposals, to some of the earliest oral traditions of the Jesus movement. There is very little, if any, evidence within Q for concrete social groups. Some scholars attempt to identify community language in passages like Q 12:33–34 and 16:13, which focus on issues of wealth and ethics:

Do not treasure for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and [an insect's] nibbling (βρῶσις) destroy and where robbers break in nor steal, but treasure for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither a moth nor [an insect's] nibbling

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[63] See Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Early Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[64] See, for example, Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 7: "The writings of the ancient Christian polemicists fostered the search for a single origin based on their claim that heresy had one author, Satan.... Scholars accepted in principle that all manifold expressions of Gnosticism could be traced to a single origin, but they searched for the source in more historical places, like heterodox Judaism."

destroy and where robbers do not break in or steal. For where your treasure is, there will also be your heart (καρδία). (Q 12:33–34)[65]

No one can serve two masters (Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν); for a person will either hate (μισήσει) the one and love (ἀγαπήσει) the other, or be devoted (ἀνθέξεται) to the one and disdain (καταφρονήσει) the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ). (Q 16:13)

John Kloppenborg describes these passages as focusing on the "hoarding activities of the elite" and suggests that the message behind them is that the "Q folk" – an interesting turn of phrase Kloppenborg repeats frequently – are "not of the urban classes in which the Jesus movement eventually spread, but the villages and towns of the Galilee, where God's actions and reign had everything to do with the basics of life." He suggests that these passages "circulated not among urbanites, but among the rural poor, not in the Gentile cities of the east, but in the towns of Jewish Galilee."[66] Yet he does not explain in detail how this material was circulated among these "folk" or how "this utopian vision was eventually effaced by the editing of Matthew and Luke."[67]

Broadly, Q scholarship has focused on an itinerancy hypothesis, that is, Q's internal "rhetoric of uprootedness" of implied social upheaval.[68] Gerd Theissen, for instance, proposes that "the ethical radicalism of the sayings transmitted to us [in Q] is the radicalism of itinerants" who lived under extreme stress.[69] Theissen's reading of Q was influenced by an

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[65] Q passages cited from James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000). The repetition in this particular passage corresponds with this and other critical editions of Q.

[66] John S. Kloppenborg, *Q: The Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 97. Emphasis in original. Kloppenborg suggests that "texts such as Q were composed to function more like musical script for performance than a textbook to be read" and that "oral-scribal interactions" account for the transmission of Q to other gospel writers (ix).

[67] Kloppenborg, *Q: The Earliest Gospel*, 96.

[68] William E. Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 157.

[69] Gerd Theissen, "The Wandering Radicals: Light Shed by Sociology of Literature on the Early Transmission of the Jesus Sayings," in *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40. Theissen even goes so far as to suggest that Jesus himself did not intend to establish communities of Christians but to establish a band of "travelling apostles, prophets and disciples who moved from place to place and could rely on small groups of sympathizers in these places." Later Theissen describes these "sympathizers" or, as he also calls them "sedentary sympathizers," in terms that resemble a "community" of Christians, using the Essenes as a comparable example to what he has in mind in terms of their eventual hierarchical construction, leadership, etc. He also

itinerancy thesis within the field that extends back to Adolf von Harnack's work on the *Didache*. Harnack argued that the *Didache* offered a set of regulations for wandering and impoverished prophets who traveled from Christian community to Christian community, seeking shelter, food, money, and other goods.[70] This imagined class of "professionally homeless preachers of the Christian message" is first encountered with the "missionary journeys on the part of Jesus' disciples . . . the wandering of Jesus himself, and Acts and Paul's letters."[71] In other words, it maps the same kind of explosive beginnings advanced by the Big Bang paradigm. While these studies attempt to give some idea of the kind of social formation that may have acted as a delivery system for Q and other Christian materials, they fail to explain the concrete processes by which the messages and teachings of these itinerant charismatics and preachers would have been received and understood, why they would be appealing in the first place, or how they are then instituted by the supposed existing communities they encountered, and so forth. Even if one wishes to argue that Paul's mission and travel support the itinerancy model often associated with Q, Paul's evident struggle to establish cohesive communities hardly supports the expansive growth and stable formations imagined by Acts.

Relatedly, Mark's gospel is of little help for those seeking details about Christian groups. Mark's Jesus is an elusive, ornery figure. A purveyor of esoteric teachings, Jesus does little to inculcate community – Mark's emphasis is on secrecy and silence (e.g., "And he warned them not to tell anyone about him," 8:30). Jesus' own disciples are unable to comprehend who he is or nearly any of his teachings. This so-called Messianic Secret greatly troubles those looking to uncover the Markan community behind

suggests that these "sympathizers" are banded together by Hellenistic "community organizers" like Paul; however, he continues to see the activities of the itinerants and the "community organizers" as fundamentally distinct. See Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 8, 18–21, 115.

[70] Adolf von Harnack, *Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel* (Leipzig: Hinrichse, 1884). Arnal also identifies the Harnack thesis as a foundation for work on Q. See Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes*, 14–18.

[71] Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes*, 13. Arnal does not hold the same strong association to Cynic-like wandering charismatics as does Theissen. He does away with the strict itinerancy hypothesis and suggests instead that the travel implied by "itinerancy," following Kloppenborg, should be imagined more like a morning walk around the Sea of Galilee than travel across long distances. See Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes*, 71, 94.

the text. Representative scholarship debates how "the gospel grew out of a christological conflict within the church" as Mark attempted to "correct what it considered to be the dangerous or false Christology … Mark's Christology is a Christology of the cross and is closely related to the title 'Son of Man.'"[72] Such concerns are more characteristic of later debates among church leaders than anything Mark indicates to his readers.

Matthew offers a Jesus who calls for a worldwide mission (e.g., 28:18–20). Matthew is also concerned with *ekklēsia* (e.g., 16:18, 18:17), and his selection of the word *ekklēsia* over *synagōgē* is often cited as evidence of the "Matthean Christians" wanting "to 'differentiate' themselves from Jewish groups."[73] A similar argument is advanced citing Matthew 21:43, with some proposing that Matthew wishes to establish the followers of Jesus as the new Israel. Among other first-century writers, *ethnē/ethnos* is a technical designation; Strabo identifies the Jews as one among four *ethnē* in Palestine, while Josephus and Philo also use the term for the Jewish people.[74] More broadly, it designates "a variety of specialized groups such as guilds and trade associations." *Ethnē* also has precedent in speaking of idealized communities. Plato, for instance, uses *ethnē* in *Republic* 421c to speak of various groups within his utopian city.[75] To ignore these referents and conclude that Matthew is talking about a divide between Judaism and the rise of a new, "truer" Israel is to ignore the function of this term in its milieu and is tantamount to importing issues of orthodoxy and heresy back onto the text.

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[72] Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 12. In this chapter, Winn is drawing on the work of a number of notable early Christian scholars and their positions on Mark, including William Wrede, Rudolf Bultmann, and Ludwig Bieler. See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1971); Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1951); Ludwig Bieler, *Theios Aner: Das Bild des "Göttlichen Menschen" in Spätantike und Frühchristentum* (Vienna: Höfels, 1935).

[73] Ascough, "Matthew and Community Formation," 113.

[74] See Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2. Philo's use of the term and its derivative is vast; an excellent resource is *The Philo Index: A Complete Greek Word Index to the Writings of Philo of Alexandria*, ed. Peder Borgen, Kåre Fuglseth, and Roald Skarsten (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 104–5. Also see Nicola Denzey Lewis, "The Limits of Ethnic Categories," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi et al. (Walnut Creek: Rowman AltaMira, 2002), 489–507, cit. 496.

[75] Anthony J. Saldarini, "Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson*, ed. David E. Aune et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 166–84, cit. 172.

Matthew does not require a religious community to speak of questions of *ekklēsia* or an ideal Israel. Among the source material at Matthew's disposal are the Septuagint, possibly Q, Paul, and Mark. It is evident that one of Matthew's prime objectives is to clarify, via an interpretation of Jewish scripture, the mysteries presented by Mark's obfuscating Jesus. Recent studies on Matthew have also noted that his Jesus can be read through a Stoic lens.[76] Matthew's Jesus is a teacher of ethics who reexamines Judean law and engages in the same kind of intellectual interpretive practices we see among other Judean writers like Philo or Paul. Moreover, it is also quite possible that Matthew received his ideas about *ekklēsia* from his knowledge of Paul. None of this literary activity requires the primacy of a Matthean community. In fact, given the tautological nature of arguments that attempt to read Matthew's language as a portrait of his fellow Christians (i.e., studies that use Matthew's language to reconstruct an imagined community and then interpret Matthew through the lens of that community), reevaluating the literary precedents for his use of terms like *ekklēsia* and *ethnē* reveals that Matthew's group-talk is a rhetorical signpost rather than evidence of literal communities behind the text.[77]

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[76] Erin Roberts, "Anger, Emotion, and Desire in the Gospel of Matthew" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2010); Roberts, *Emotion, Morality, and Matthew's Mythic Jesus*; Stanley K. Stowers, "Jesus the Teacher and Stoic Ethics in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Tuomus Rasimus, and Ismo Dundenberg (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 59–76. Interestingly, and as Jefferson's objections attest, the observation that the gospels and Paul had parallels with philosophical movements of the first century was made very early on in historical critical reviews of this literature – albeit in the context of citing the imposition of those paradigms on the original "primitive Jewish Christian eschatology" of the Jerusalem church. See, for example, Rudolf Bultmann, "Primitive Christianity as a Syncretistic Phenomenon," in *Primitive Christianity: In Its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (London: Thames & Hudson, 1956), 210, 211: "Christian missionary preaching was not only the proclamation of Christ, but, when addressed to a Gentile audience, a preaching of monotheism as well. For this, not only arguments derived from the Old Testament, but the natural theology of Stoicism was pressed into service."

[77] Although, as I continue to argue, this does not preclude the existence of some kind of "religious" group among Matthew's social network. I simply question the primacy of any such group over other formative associations, like other writers. As noted above, Dwight N. Peterson makes a similar argument concerning the dubious nature of assuming that all potential "communal" references within a text are in reference to a concrete fellowship of Christians, stating that the method overall is aimed at establishing a "means of attaining interpretive control . . . in order [for the scholar] to achieve desired results" from the text in question. Peterson enumerates several of what he calls "unjustified assumptions which are entailed within the drive to construct communities behind documents." Of these critiques, three are particularly striking and, in my view, relevant to the broader study

The same observations made about Acts throughout this chapter also apply to Luke. Luke's communal language is wrapped up with its presentation of a larger myth of origins. Luke presents Jesus as a figure akin to other well-known Greco-Roman literary characters and heroes. In many respects, Luke writes "more like a normal Hellenistic author" and, thus, "the idea of something that suggest[s] communal authorship [is] exposed for its oddness."[78] In her work on Luke–Acts, for instance, Marianne Palmer Bonz notes the parallels between Luke–Acts and the *Aeneid*'s efforts to bring "the Augustan present directly into contact with the heroic past." Vergil's epic "incorporated a complex synthesis of patriotic, moral, and religious themes in its mythologizing history of archaic Roman origins and of the divine prophecies that would read their eschatological fulfillment in the Golden Age of Augustan rule."[79] The same themes of genealogy, eschatological fulfillment, cosmic destiny, and mythologizing of origins takes place in Luke–Acts and, for that matter, in Paul's letters. And Luke was not alone in penning a "Hellenized Jewish" epic when considered alongside Philo, Theodotus, Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, and the fragments of an epic poem recorded by Alexander Polyhistor (preserved by Eusebius).[80] While not in meter, Luke nonetheless

of the Synoptic gospels and Q: first, that "community constructors" assume to be able to understand an author's psychology, "as if one can reconstruct the intention of an author when one has no information about who the author was, or what that author wrote, other than that abstracted from the document one is reading," cautioning that the "intentionality of a document is not the basis of interpretation, but the result"; second, he denies that one can assume to know the condition of the audience of the gospels and, furthermore, that this audience is "somehow constitutive of the meaning of the text"; third, he proposes that the exercise of attempting to retrieve the historical Markan community, for example, "obscures the interests of the reader of Mark behind a screen of alleged historical 'objectivity.'" This then allows the interpreter to impose on the text any number of socio-historical reconstructions, utilizing preferred methodological devices in order to achieve desired interpretive results. He rightly likens this method to a house of cards that "has the potential to be quite beautiful and complex … but all one needs to do is to turn on a fan." Peterson, *The Origins of Mark*, 156–61.

[78] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community,'" 240.

[79] Bonz, *The Past as Legacy*, 23–24. It is important to note that, while Bonz recognizes these parallels, she continues to subscribe to a Big Bang paradigm of Christianity's social development. Interestingly, however, she remains aware of the implausibility of that social model, even if she does not address it directly. Phrases such as "[Christianity's] proclamation had met with a surprising degree of success" and "Equally as stunning as the rapid success of the Christian mission among Gentiles, however, was the finality of the rupture of the church with its religious past" are found throughout her monograph (Bonz, *The Past as Legacy*, 25).

[80] Bonz, *The Past as Legacy*, 27–29.

can be situated within an established genre of foundational epic, *bioi*, and the novel, as I will discuss.

While the subject of this monograph is the Synoptics, it is worth noting that the Gospel of John elicits a dynamic and complex set of discussions about social formations, including references to Samaritans (e.g., 8:48, 52), Pharisees (e.g., 7:45–48, 12:42), and the synagogue (e.g., 9:22, 16:2, 20:19). Scholarship on the imagined Johannine community represented by these references links it to "Paul's Jewish-Christian opponents in Corinth," "the emergence of motifs that had a later flowering in Gnosticism," or "inner-community controversy … in a period after the conflict with the synagogue had begun to subside."[81] Of the four canonical gospels, John is arguably the gospel least associated with offering an account of the historical Jesus given its more cryptic and difficult teachings. Yet because of its strong presentation of group, it is frequently associated with the historical circumstances of its supposed community. Again, the vast and complex scholarship on this gospel is beyond the scope of this study; its role in evolving debates about the historical Jesus in the Romantic and Victorian eras – and the continued influence of these debates – is arguably a book in and of itself.[82] However, it is notable that John's discussion of social formations does *not* lend itself to a sense of a worldwide movement. Compellingly, John concludes with a reference to the culture of books: "And there are also many other things that [risen] Jesus did which, if every one of them were written down (γράφηται), I think that the cosmos itself could not contain the books that would be written (οὐδ᾽αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρήσειν τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία)" (21:25). With this ending, John invokes ancient writers, not mythic Christian communities. In other words, John reflects on a social activity in which he himself is engaged, not on an account of the mythic beginnings of Christianity.

Bruce Lincoln notes that, much like with religious communities, it is common for those studying myths to associate them with "specific, ethnically and linguistically defined populations" and that this orientation takes for granted that nations, "cultures," and/or *Völker* (depending on the speaker's discourse) are primordial, bounded, unproblematic entities

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[81] Robert Kysar, "The Contribution of D. Moody Smith to Johannine Scholarship," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Carl Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 3–17, cit. 4.

[82] For more on the significance of historical Jesus research at the fin de siècle, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 252–91.

and that myth is the equally primordial voice, essence, and heritage of that group. Myth and group are understood to be linked in a symbiotic relation of co-production, each being simultaneously producer and product of the other.[83] Lincoln recognizes that this treatment of myth in contemporary scholarship has roots in the anti-Enlightenment elevation of *völkisch* and the national reclamation projects of men like Johann Gottfried Herder and the Brothers Grimm. These Romantic-era projects possessed a strong political element, aimed at generating a sense of national identification; however, in the process they reinterpreted the myths they selected as the "reinstation of something ancient, eternal, and authentic." Romantic studies on the *Volksgeist* of the German people, James Macpherson's *Ossian*, or Herder's meditations on Shakespeare or the *Geist* of the Hebrew scriptures were myth about myth: "It is not always the case that myths are the product and reflection of a people who tells stories in which they effectively narrative themselves … myths are stories in which some people narrate others, and at times the existence of those others is itself the product of mythic discourse."[84]

Indeed, Herder and the German Romantics occupy outsized standing in the intellectual genealogy of the study of New Testament and early Christianity. Herder in particular had significant influence over the History of Religions School and a number of the scholars discussed in the Preface: Hermann Gunkel, founder of Form Criticism, and Johannes Weiss, teacher of Rudolf Bultmann, who was the *Doktorvater* of Helmut Koester, who remains a great influence on the field today. In the next chapter, I examine the influence of German Romanticism on our approaches to the early Christian Big Bang and the concept of community. This study reveals that more than a product of Christianity's own second-century invention of its origins, the persistence of the community model within the field has strong, and not always immediately evident, ties to eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century political and philosophical thought. Recognizing our inheritance from the Romantic movement helps us to see how we have arrived at such an idiosyncratic place in our evaluation of the gospels in order to begin to reconsider these writings more properly within their intellectual milieu.

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[83] Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 210.   [84] Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 211.