# The Quest of Christian Origins

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The papers in this volume were prepared for the inaugural session of Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins in October 2006, which focused on the question: When and where did Christianity really begin? Almost since its inception Christian tradition has focused on the figure of Jesus. So in the popular mind Christianity’s origins are generally associated with him. But as modern historical study has increasingly tended to locate Jesus somewhere in the cultural cross-currents of first-century Jewish Palestine, scholars’ opinions about where to set the starting point of the Christian movement have become more diverse. If Jesus himself was a Jew of some sort and did not intend to found a new religion, then when did an identifiably characteristic “Christian” impulse arise? In his first followers reaction to his message during his lifetime, or only after his death in their faith in his resurrection? Or did it actually begin with a missionary impulse traceable to some later charismatic experience? If so, whose? The remnant of Jesus’ faithful followers gathered in Jerusalem as portrayed in Acts? Or the paradoxical enlightenment of an outsider, like Paul, who never knew the historical Jesus? The authors of the following articles probe the question of origins itself and test the cases made for arguing that Christianity really began with one of these four suggested points—encounters with the historical Jesus, his resurrection, Pentecost, or Paul.

First, Phil Devenish reviews and endorses Willi Marxsen’s thesis that Christian faith is rooted in positive reaction to encounters with the challenging message of Jesus. Employing Marxsen’s distinction between the “Jesus kerygmata”—i.e., re-presentations of the words and/or deeds of Jesus—and the “Christ kerygmata”—i.e., proclamations about “the Christ” (without regard to the historical activity of Jesus himself), Devenish argues that the basic Christian impulse is to reenact Jesus so that others might share the decisive experience of encountering him.

Next, Joe Bessler reviews and critiques that the resurrection of Jesus is central and indispensable to Christian faith. With a sweeping historical survey of the role resurrection has played in Christian theological debate from Paul to contemporary writers, Bessler argues that, while Christianity may not have
actually “originated” in a chronological sense with the event of Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus’ resurrection as a theological motif has been and continues to be a fundamental focus of Christian thought.

Dan Smith then tackles the question of whether visionary experiences of the resurrected Jesus can be regarded as the foundational impetus for the whole range of first-century movements that claimed to be inspired by Jesus, whether they explicitly identify him as “the Christ” or not. After reviewing the positions of current scholars who argue that the factual event of Jesus’ resurrection is “the best historical explanation” (N. T. Wright) and “presuppositional and foundational” (J. D. G. Dunn) for the rise of the multi-faceted first-century Christian movement, Smith argues that this is an anachronistic homogenization that fails to account for Q and other alternate models for Jesus’ vindication that do not “presuppose” his resurrection.

The next three papers critique the view that Christianity really “began” with the charismatic inspired mission which Acts describes as occurring at the first Pentecost after Jesus’ execution. First, Joe Tyson questions the use of Acts as a historical “source” for first-century events, since its contents are best explained as a second-century “myth” of Christian origins designed to counter Marcion’s interpretation of Paul.

Building on this insight, Shelly Matthews offers a feminist critique of Acts’ androgenic portrait of Christian charismatic origins. Noting that Acts concentrates on the leadership role of elite males and ignores or deliberately suppresses reference to any early formative influence of women and slaves on the Christian movement unlike the letters of Paul and other sources, Matthews argues that there is “no compelling reason to understand Acts 2 as containing any source material” relating to the origins of Christianity.

Todd Penner presses the critique of scholarship that accepts Acts’ depiction of Pentecost events as a historical point of origin for the Christian movement by analyzing and questioning the human need to conceptualize beginning. Arguing that ancient writers used stories of origins to establish the character of their subject, rather than to reconstruct the actual circumstances of an historical beginning, Penner formulates nine narrative critical theses for interpreting Acts 2.

Finally, Art Dewey critiques the frequent allegation that Paul was the real founder of Christianity. Arguing that historical hindsight often misrepresents the actual intentions of historic figures, Dewey discounts the historical value of the representation of Paul in Acts and deuvero-Pauline literature and focuses on analyzing Paul's conception of the *ekklesia* in his genuine letters. Arguing that the evidence shows that Paul envisioned local communities that embraced differences in their membership without setting up longterm organization or consideration of the consequences, Dewey contends that the view that Paul “founded” the Christianity that actually emerged in the wake of his mission is an anachronism.
In the spirit of embracing diversity, this volume concludes with voting records assessing the degree of consensus among Seminar Fellows with theses proposed by authors of these papers.

—Mahlon H. Smith
When Did Christianity Begin?

Philip E. Devenish

According to the available evidence, as this is currently interpreted by critical historical scholarship, Christianity began when people—certain people—met Jesus. It began not with Jesus in himself, nor after his death, but during his life, as and when some people who met him experienced him positively as decisive for the ultimate basis and meaning of their lives; for this is what Christianity seems to have started out to be about. This was the point of Christianity, and this is how it began.

Without regard to such current interpretation of the evidence, one might hold alternate views, such as, for instance, that “Jesus was the first Christian,” or that “Christianity begins only with the resurrection,” or perhaps even that “Christianity began with Paul.” But in its beginnings, at least insofar as we have access to these, no one does seem to have thought any such thing. Unless we impose a later definition on the word “Christianity,” we must say that Christianity began when people—not anyone or everyone, but certain people—met Jesus. What were these encounters like, and who was the Jesus they encountered?

PEOPLE ENCOUNTER JESUS
In the words of Willi Marxsen,

Various people stand face to face with Jesus. They hear him speak, they see him do something. This speaking and acting of Jesus quite obviously makes different impressions on the witnesses. Some are moved by it, others it leaves cold, still others are repulsed or angered by it. The same speaking and acting of Jesus has completely different effects on those who experience it. And now these people reflect; they consider. They experience Jesus speaking and acting, but it has different effects on them. Still, on the basis of these different effects, they reason back to the one from whom the effects proceed. And now they give Jesus different names: positive, neutral, or even negative.¹

¹ Willi Marxsen, Jesus and the Church: The Beginnings of Christianity, 4.

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Here Marxsen describes how Christianity begins. Various people meet or encounter Jesus, and some of them—by no means all—are “moved” (betroffen). The people who experience Jesus in this way, as positively decisive for their lives, are the first Christians. According to the evidence we possess, encounters such as this are the beginnings of Christianity.

At the same time, the only reason that we know this—and also the only way we can know about it—is that some of them (and again, by no means all of them) communicated this to others; they shared it. Some of the people who had such positively decisive encounters with Jesus testified or witnessed to them, and this both in word and in deed; they sought to pass such experiences on.

In other words, we must distinguish two aspects of Christianity in the form of these originating encounters. There is, on the one hand, the earliest Christian witness, that external testimony for which we have direct (if, naturally, only historically reconstructable) evidence, and, on the other hand, what we may call the earliest Christian faith, that internal experience which, while it will have given rise to such testimony, we have access to only indirectly through such testimonies.

And yet, in speaking of either such internal “faith” or such external “witness” in the singular, we must remember that we have always only multiple expressions of such constructs in the plural, each with its own presuppositions and cast in its own terms. We have direct and indirect access only and always to various “beginnings” of Christianity and, indeed, only to some of these. But to these we do have access.

Marxsen identifies a threefold typology of the earliest encounters with Jesus. “Some are moved by [the speaking and acting of Jesus]; others it leaves cold; still others are repulsed or angered by it.” Such encounters are either positive, neutral, or negative. We should perhaps refine this typology somewhat, and in a moment, we will.

The crucial type, of course, is the positively decisive one, for this is what got Christianity going in the first place. “You are the Messiah,” as Peter is presented as explicitly proclaiming.2 Or, the same thing, yet without a single word, “And he got up and followed him” (Mark 2:14 et passim). The key here is the note of ultimate decisiveness, of what these people took to be the basis and standard for shaping their lives. Thus, Marxsen can summarize such encounters in the words, “Jesus enacts an act of God.”3

This is what the history of Christian theology in the first half of the twentieth century is all about. Karl Barth famously rejects Liberal Theology. Harnack and the other great Liberals, he argues, just don’t get it. They miss the point of the

2. Mark 8:29 par. As Marxsen explains, the various Christological titles are so many functional equivalents; Jesus and the Church, ch. 1 “Jesus Has Many Names.”
3. Marxsen, Jesus and the Church, 60.
ultimate decisiveness witnessed to in encountering Jesus, and so they miss everything. They don’t see that the early Christian witness is “kerygma.” Rudolf Bultmann reads Barth and agrees with him on this key point. Of course, he works it all out quite differently, critically appropriating an “existentialist” philosophy in the effort to clarify this distinctively “existential” point. But, to see, as both Barth and Bultmann do, that the early (and, for Marxsen, also the earliest) Christian texts have the character of “kerygma” is to make both a literary or rhetorical judgment about their form or genre (the emphasis of form criticism) and a substantive judgment about their point or meaning as ultimately decisive call or witness (as emphasized by kerygma theology as a whole). That point, at least according to all the texts, was (and so is) that encountering Jesus was (and still can be) for certain people a decisive experience for life at its very core. They had, as Marxsen puts it, been positively “moved,” invited and challenged to “risk” (“Wagnis”), expected to “give themselves over to” Jesus (“sich einlassen auf”), and it was therefore theirs to witness to this and to pass it on. And this they did, in word and deed.

At the same time, in Marxsen’s words, “still others are repulsed or even angered by [the speaking and acting of Jesus].” It is worth asking why people had this sort of reaction, which, of course, we can do only on the basis of trying to understand what they said and did. Strikingly, some—but apparently not all—such negative reactions seem precisely to mirror the positively decisive ones. Thus, in terms that make perfectly explicit that what is at issue is ultimate decisiveness, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Luke 11:15 par.). In other words, in meeting Jesus, one is encountered not by the (positively decisive) “finger of God” (v. 20), but by the (negative, yet alike decisive) “ruler of the demons.” Or in similarly explicit fashion, “some of the scribes,” we are told, “said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming’” (Matt 9:3). For blasphemy concerns precisely what is taken to be ultimately decisive. And so, too, implicitly, for the self-defensive demand, “By what authority?” (Mark 11:28 par.). Again, authorization is about ultimate legitimacy. All of these people are taken to have understood perfectly well the ultimately decisive character of what encountering Jesus was about; they just disagreed and came down on the other side. The people who reacted in these ways also took the speaking and acting of Jesus as decisive—and they rejected it. But the point is, they did get it; they, too, understood.

It is particularly instructive that we do have these negative corroborations of the “kerygmatic” or ultimately decisive point of the earliest encounters, since the only testimony we have is precisely that of positive witnesses. While the texts we have are all “Christian,” that is, while they all proclaim the positive decisiveness of Jesus, they nonetheless show that some people both grasped

4. Marxsen, Jesus and the Church, xxvii.
and also rejected what, to those who testified to him in a positive way, encountering Jesus meant.

Having said this, there seem also to be indications that other people misunderstood Jesus—that is, that they failed to grasp the ultimate decisiveness of the encounters with him that some, whether those “for” or “against,” judged the meaning of these encounters to be. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 par.) reflects one such misunderstanding. Here admiration received masquerades as obedience expected. We are told that the words, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (Matt 8:21) express another; the ultimate decisiveness is missed. Such people seem to have admired, perhaps even revered Jesus, but, at least in the view of the authors of these texts, precisely thereby they have failed to grasp what meeting him was all about. They responded positively, but mistakenly; they missed the point.

In like manner, certain others who responded negatively also missed the point—although, as we have seen, not simply because of the negative character of their response. “Where did this man get all this?” some are presented as asking, and then as answering, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (Mark 6:2f.). Such people take the wrong kind of offense. They mistake the ultimately decisive authority that properly invokes God (or Beelzebub!) for the merely penultimate sociopolitical authority of status and family connections. So, too, with the assessment, “He has gone out of his mind” (Mark 3:21). Mental health is not the point. Mere psychological and sociopolitical evaluation, positive admiration, and negative disdain all alike miss the mark. All are so many forms of reductionism; they either fail to grasp the ultimate decisiveness of the encounter altogether or they mistakenly substitute something penultimate for what is really at stake.

In sum: On the basis of our current understanding of the relevant evidence, it is clear that Christianity began as kerygma, that is, with the proclamation that encounters with Jesus both had and are to have the character of ultimate decisiveness for one’s life—with all its personal, social and political implications. In this most basic respect, Barth, Bultmann, and at least one succeeding generation of New Testament scholars and theologians were right in rejecting Liberal Theology’s failure to grasp this point. For this reason, we can only also reject the recrudescence of such Liberal misunderstandings in their various Neoliberal forms today. In its beginnings, Christianity was not about either a hero (or villain!), on the one hand, or a psychological, social, or political message to be admired or despised, on the other—even if, as we have seen that the texts remind us, there were such “Liberals” then, too! Rather, it was about a decisive encounter, about an ultimate “yes” or “no.” Kierkegaard was right. It was and is a matter of “Either/Or.” When, grasping this point, people who had been “moved” and had “given themselves over” to Jesus acted accordingly, Christianity began.
FORM and CONTENT
The “Jesus-kerygma” and the “Jesus-business”

Christian experience began as encounter; Christian witness began as kerygma. “The proclaimer became the proclaimed.” What were these earliest proclamations like, and who was it that was proclaimed?

Form criticism (Formgeschichte) has demonstrated that small units of early Christian testimony arose and circulated independently before being incorporated into collections and narratives. Marxsen observes that this means, negatively, that “it is not as if we only really have the whole once we have the sum of the independent traditions,” and positively, that “each tradition by itself expresses the whole.”5 He calls what turn out to be the earliest of these pre-synoptic units “Jesus-kerygmata” for reasons relating to both their form and content. Formally and literarily, he distinguishes them from traditions that speak in terms of “Christ” (“Christ-kerygmata”) and of “Jesus Christ” (“Jesus Christ-kerygmata”). Materially, the term is meant to indicate that their content is precisely “Jesus,” in a sense that we will specify in a moment. He argues that “each (such) independent tradition contains the whole, even if from a differing perspective in each case. In this way, each tradition both expresses and invites one into the experience of the whole.”6

In other words, the literary form of the earliest Christian tradition mirrors its content. Discrete units of testimony each proclaim, and fully, the Jesus whom people encountered. Some of these Jesus-kerygmata focus on deeds. For instance, they present Jesus engaging in table fellowship with unacceptable elements in contemporary society, or performing an exorcism, or breaking the Sabbath. A particular act is selected as ultimately decisive and is proclaimed as such. Other traditions of this type focus on words. These present Jesus preaching and teaching, perhaps engaging in a particular situation of controversy, or speaking by means of a parable. In traditions such as these, a saying (perhaps because of its striking content) or a situation of teaching or prophesying (perhaps on account of its memorable character) is similarly proclaimed as decisive for its hearers. In this way, each version lifts up a specific feature (whether of behavior or language) of a particular event or situation and presents the Jesus inherent in it, whether “Jesus-in-action” or “Jesus-as-proclaiming.” And, since “each interprets the other—the proclamation the activity, and the activity the proclamation,” what we are introduced to is “in the broadest sense Jesus—not merely his proclamation. This is precisely why I entitle it ‘Jesus-kerygma’.7

The content of such Jesus-kerygmata is, as Marxsen calls it, “in the broadest sense Jesus.” Let us speak of “the kerygmatic Jesus” to indicate that the

5. Marxsen, Jesus and the Church, 126.
6. Marxsen, Jesus and the Church, 67.
7. Marxsen, Jesus and the Church, 131, 82.
subject-matter or content of such earliest units of tradition is the concrete, earthly Jesus, as people encountered him in word and deed, and as they then sought, in Marxsen’s precise sense, “kerymatically” to pass him on.\(^8\) Moreover, insofar as the Jesus to whom such testimony is borne is Jesus encountered as “Jesus-in-action” or “Jesus-as-proclaiming,” that is, Jesus as deed or Jesus as word, let us say that they bear witness to “the person Jesus,” as distinct from “the person of Jesus,” that is, a Jesus only ever to be hypothesized as behind the person encountered. It was not the Jesus-behind-Jesus that was proclaimed, but the encountered Jesus. This was “the proclaimer who became the proclaimed.”

Thus, the Jesus of the Jesus-kerygma is an integral and indivisible subject-matter or content. This is what is at issue, not the “bearer” of a “gospel.”\(^9\) There is just the person Jesus, not a bearer to be understood now as “example,” “paradigm,” “hero,” “martyr,” or “great personage,” as the “author” or “agent” who bears a “content” taken to comprise a “message,” “teachings,” or “social or political program.” Such approaches mistakenly divide attention either toward a “who” it is that happens to bear certain words or deeds, or to a “what” that happens to be said or done. For the Jesus-kerygma, there is just one thing, and this is an indivisible whole: the person or event Jesus as ultimately decisive.\(^10\)

To indicate what takes place as and when such a proclaimer is proclaimed, Marxsen coins the phrase, “die Sache Jesu geht weiter.” By this, whatever Marxsen meant, we should mean, as we might say in similarly colloquial fashion, “the Jesus-business continues.”\(^11\) For what is at stake in the Jesus-kerygmata is not “the cause” or “purpose” or “work” or “ministry” or “gospel” of Jesus, but simply, Jesus—the kerygmatic Jesus, the person Jesus. This is “the Jesus-business,” and this it is the purpose of the Jesus-kerygmata concretely to reenact and, so, to pass on. People who have encountered Jesus as ultimately decisive for themselves simply want to enable others to encounter him in this way, too. For Christianity in its beginnings, in the independently circulating Jesus-kerygmata, form expresses content.

BEGINNINGS and BEYOND

Where did they go from there?

Up to now, we have spoken of the beginnings of Christianity—the very beginnings. Christianity began when people met the earthly person Jesus, during

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8. Thus, Marxsen can speak of “Jesus of Nazareth: An Event,” Jesus and the Church, Chap. 4.
9. As Marxsen clarifies in “Jesus: Bearer or Content of the Gospel?” Jesus and the Church, Chap. 3.
10. I have elaborated this point in the “Introduction” to Jesus and the Church and in, for example, “The Sovereignty of Jesus and the Sovereignty of God” and “The So-called Resurrection of Jesus and Explicit Christian Faith.”
his life and, having taken him to be decisive for the ultimate basis and direction of their lives, witnessed to this in word and deed as ways of sharing it with and for others. However, it is important not to allow this focus on the events that happened—and that only could have happened—during Jesus’ life to displace interest in events that took place—and that could only have taken place—after his death.

On the basis of a literary insight of form criticism, Marxsen distinguishes the “Jesus-kerygma” of the independently circulating presynoptic traditions from the “Christ-kerygma,” typically represented by pre-Pauline and Pauline materials, in which the subject-term is not “Jesus,” but “Christ,” as well as from the linguistically mixed form of “Jesus Christ-kerygma” in the composition of the synoptic texts themselves. While it is not possible here to follow up on or to further Marxsen’s presentation of the history behind such form-history—nor is it necessary to do so to answer the question of this session!—given the focus of the seminar on “place,” and Marxsen’s way of accounting for the historical relation between the Jesus- and Christ-kerygma, a few words on the issue of the events following Jesus’ death will perhaps not be amiss.

On the basis of the literary findings, Marxsen hypothesizes two early spheres of tradition. One begins during Jesus’ life, consists in Jesus-kerygmata, is, at least so far as we can tell, innocent of events in Jerusalem surrounding and including his crucifixion and death, and takes place in Galilee. The other begins after Jesus’ death by crucifixion, is, so far as we can tell, innocent of Jesus-kerygmata proclaiming encounters with Jesus during his life, takes the form of Christ-kerygma, and begins in Jerusalem. Thus, Marxsen identifies two forms, emerging from two places: Jesus-kerygma from Galilee and Christ-kerygma from Jerusalem.

Where do we go from here?

The Seminar should take account of these suggestions in the work before it. For his part, to speak now in summary fashion, Marxsen argues, much as did Rudolf Bultmann in his Theology of the New Testament, not only that Paul’s witness and that of the earliest Jesus-traditions are alike formally kerygmatic in character, sharing a claim to ultimate decisiveness for human life, but also that Paul’s version of the Christ-kerygma, at least, while virtually independent of the Jesus-kerygma and utilizing very different forms of thought and speech, communicates the same material understanding of the ultimate criterion of life and, with important qualifications for a different time and different “places,” of its consequences. That is, and here I oversimplify to make the point, Paul’s Christ-kerygma and the Jesus-kerygma have the same God and—and also because of this—the same deeply countercultural ethic.

I conclude with this observation for two reasons. One is the conviction I share with Bultmann and Marxsen that it is finally impossible even properly to understand the materials with which this Seminar concerns itself without explicitly addressing the issue of ultimacy, one way of reading which—and the way in which it was read in the materials at issue—is through the concept of God. And, in due course, this means having to become a philosopher and a theologian for one’s own purposes for oneself. There is no other way. For otherwise, one can only fail to see what these materials are about; one will only miss the point, end up “stumbling” (ἐσκανδαλίζοντο; Mark 6:3), asking “Where does all this come from?” and substituting one or another form of the penultimate for the ultimacy that is really at issue.

The other reason is “like unto” the first. As we have seen, there were two ways of getting, as distinct from missing, the point of the ultimacy that encountering Jesus seems to have been about. One did not have to agree and accept; one could also disagree and reject. But properly even to understand, at least in this case, is to choose. “As it was in the beginning,” it seems, so it is now and ever shall be.

WORKS CITED


Did Christianity Begin with the Resurrection?

Joseph A. Bessler

SORTING the QUESTION

Did Christianity begin with the Resurrection? The question sounds simple enough—just the kind of big basic question Bob Funk would ask and want answered. But our question is loaded with ambiguous words that have multiple meanings or interpretations: “Christianity,” “begin,” “resurrection”—that’s half the words in the question. “Did” ends up being pretty straightforward, unless one takes the question to imply a continuing theological question: “does Christian faith begin with affirming the resurrection?” The word “with” is also something of a problem. Does “begin with” mean a definitive starting point, or objective ground of Christianity, or does it mean accompaniment, i.e. resurrection is one of a number of things with which Christianity begins? Even as we attempt to clarify ambiguities in the question we will still encounter a basic epistemological vagueness to the question. I don’t mean vagueness pejoratively but descriptively—an indeterminateness due to the fact that we simply lack clear, universal standards for assessing both the question and its answers.

Let’s begin by sorting the ambiguities. The word “Christian” was not used until late in the first century or possibly early second century. How does that “fact” affect our discussion of “Christianity”? Does Christianity “begin” before there are “Christians”? Were the initial apostles and disciples “Christians” insofar as they were followers of Jesus? It would seem strange to leave them out, yet their number consists clearly of Jews as well as gentiles. Is there “Christianity” prior to the separation of Jews and Christians in the wake of the destruction of the temple and re-organization of Judaism? Some other point of institutional development, such as Irenaeus’ “rule of faith” (about 180) might supply another benchmark, or, even more definitively, the establishment of Christianity in the fourth century as the imperial religion. Of course, one could also mean by Christianity, Christian faith, which opens the question of identity in a more trans-historical and perhaps more normative way than an historical tracing of
the development of communities, rituals and institutions. Put this way: Does Christian faith begin with the Resurrection? shifts the question from an historical horizon to an explicitly, and even contemporary theological one: does Christian faith today begin with the Resurrection?

The word “begin” or the phrase “begin with” is ambiguous in large part because the word Christianity is. In addition, however, “beginning” suggests a kind of definitive origin; yet, if so, where? In the “self-understanding” of Jesus, in interpretations of his ministry, in the earliest communities of Jesus-followers, in the activity of the Holy Spirit, and so on? Answering this question of beginning with any precise “certainty” is, I fear, out of the question.

Which brings us to the final term, resurrection. What is meant here? An objective “act” or “event,” e.g., a bodily resuscitation of a corpse, an enduring of a soul, a raising, as Paul says, of a spiritual body, or, does one mean subjective “resurrection experiences” such as visions, hidden presences only gradually revealed, sacramental encounters? Is one speaking of an event that occurred “on the third day,” or of a growing conviction that may have developed over twenty years? In addition, we must ask about the texts which speak of resurrection; did they function to ground specific belief in Jesus’ resurrection (in other words: were they trying to demonstrate the facticity of the resurrection?) or do the texts themselves have other concerns, e.g., theological—the affirmation of God’s liberating power; quasi-ecclesial—issues of authority in the continuing/developing communities, etc.?

Here is how I intend to sort the ambiguities. At the most basic level, I include in the word Christianity followers of Jesus prior to his death and the early communities of Jesus’ followers prior to any name of Christian being applied to an emerging movement. In making this judgment, I intend no disrespect to Jesus’ Jewishness or that of his followers. I mean only to insist that whatever else Christianity comes to mean it must include those historically early communities both before and after his death who were persuaded by him, who followed him and who sought to live by his teaching as a way of enacting the kingdom of God. By choosing this broad understanding of “Christianity” I shape the meaning of the term “beginning” to include Jesus’ life and ministry and the possibilities for being-in-the-world that his teaching and action opened up. Insofar

1. Notice that this initial move is problematic for some. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza comments: “The salvation-history approach, initiated by Peterson and Schlier, developed and adapted by Kaspar and Ratzinger, proposes not only that the Church was founded after Easter and after Jesus’ rejection by Israel but also that the origin of the Church as only possible after Jesus’ rejection and death. Only after Jesus’ disciples—called by Jesus to be representatives of the new Israel—and only after Israel in its leaders had rejected Jesus could a new stage in salvation history begins. Only after the end of his life does the possibility for a new life emerge” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Foundational Theology, 103).
as Christianity involves a decision to follow Jesus, not as a god-man but as a teacher/leader attempting to hold a community together in the face of political/economic/ideological attack, then clearly people were making that decision prior to Jesus’ death. For such people/communities “resurrection” would not provide a definitive starting point for faith. Below, however, I do take up the question: did the death of Jesus create a crisis of faith?

To be sure, resurrection remains a decisive theme in the development of the Jesus movement and what emerges over time as Christianity. In taking up the question of the significance of the resurrection for Christianity and Christian faith, therefore, I will look not only to the early Jesus communities but to later developments of Christianity as a narrative, dogmatic, and institutional structure and the changing ways in which the term “resurrection” functions in Christian thought.

In Part one of the essay, I explore issues and developments in the period from early Jesus communities to the formation and trajectory of classical Christianity. While I forego any discussion of Jesus’ self-understanding, I begin by asking whether the death of Jesus caused a crisis of faith in his followers. Answering that question, partially in the negative, I go on to show the significance of the resurrection in the rhetoric of the early Christian movement and the later, imperial church.

In Part two of the essay, I show how modernity’s expanding need for open, public discourse created a crisis of faith in the narrative structure of Established Christian churches, and a new crisis between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In this part of the essay, I draw upon my recent research which shows how the separation of Church and State, and the end of the Established Churches’ control over civil society, eventuated in the retreat of Christian theology from the public square, evident in Schweitzer’s and Kähler’s responses to the success of the historical-Jesus movement. After Schweitzer, Kähler, Barth and company, the fate of resurrection discourse depends on the scope of the public addressed by theological discourse. I will provide several examples.

2. An approach pursued by E. Schillebeeckx (for example, in his book Jesus: An Experiment in Christology), where he argued for Jesus’ self-consciousness as the eschatological prophet. See Fiorenza, 22. While offering a distinctive, historical argument, Schillebeeckx was part of a wider modern turn to questions of Jesus’ consciousness. Writes Fiorenza: “Although this consciousness was understood as ontological and not merely psychological in most major Christological formulations from Schleiermacher to Rahner, the modern emphasis upon consciousness as the expression of the being of Christ represents a new foundationalism that seeks to ground Christological affirmations in the consciousness of Jesus” (92). Fiorenza footnotes S. Ogden’s The Point of Christology. It was Ogden who was sharply critical of this argument from Jesus’ consciousness, and he aimed that argument quite specifically against scholars connected to the New Quest for the Historical Jesus.
RESURRECTION from EARLY COMMUNITIES to CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

Did the Death of Jesus Create a Crisis for his Disciples?

Most theologians and biblical scholars have answered this question with a decisive “Yes.” Typically, the arguments fall out in two related ways:

1. the disciples’ early expectations of political triumph followed by the catastrophic events of Jerusalem resulted in crisis, and
2. a more psychological approach phrased typically in the form of a question: how could the disciples go on to do all that they did without some restoration of their hope and trust in Jesus?

According to the first argument, the disciples anticipated a decisive political victory over the Romans and a restoration of Israel’s autonomy. The line from the story of the Emmaus road, “We had hoped that he was the one to vindicate Israel,” is often used to point-up such expectations, and the consequent despair in the wake of the crucifixion. The second argument might assume the first, but need not. Here one could imagine disciples with faith but without the courage to act. One thinks of the story of the upper room in John 20:19–22. Not all have signed on to the “crisis” theory, however.

In the 1970s and ’80s a number of biblical scholars and theologians argued that Jesus’ death would have caused no such crisis. These scholars looked to expectations in the Jewish cultural environment, already evident in Jesus’ teaching and ministry, to locate the basis of the early church’s resurrection faith. According to theologians such as Rudolf Pesch, widespread expectation of a messianic, eschatological prophet formed the context of Jesus’ self-understanding.

3. Reimarus argued for such a crisis—although he thought both Jesus and the disciples had political, messianic aspirations to overthrow the Romans and found a new Israel. The crisis, upon Jesus’ death, according to Reimarus, was resolved by the apostles/disciples by re-inventing a spiritual intention to Jesus’ discourse and lying about the resurrection, and miracles, and so on for the sake of lining their own pockets. Most other theological commentators, including Lessing, were less harsh in their interpretations.

4. Ogden sharply criticized the historical proposals of the New Quest for trying to “get into the mind of Jesus.” He thought this was simply an historical and philosophical impossibility which undermined the “historical” character of their research. I would agree with him on that point, although I wish he would criticize scholars like N. T. Wright on the same grounds. While concerned about accessing the mind of Jesus, however, many theologians have shown no such qualms about entering into the minds of the “earliest witnesses,” whom, they suggest, would have “lost hope,” or been in despair about the death of Jesus. They take the story of the Emmaus road in a psychologically literal way in order to emphasize the decisiveness of the resurrection for sparking or instilling a new empowering reality of Christian faith—a kind of empowerment, one should add that sounds a lot like St. Augustine’s theory of grace as “the power not only to will but to do.” I think such a theological reading is reductionistic, designed to clean up all the untidiness of historical complexity in one fell swoop.
and mission. Because his disciples shared his sense of identity and mission, according to Pesch, his death would have created no sense of crisis. While Pesch's basic assumption of such widespread messianic expectation was criticized as anachronistic—imposing a cultural expectation that actually occurred only later upon the earlier time-period of Jesus' ministry—other positions have emerged to challenge the "crisis" understanding of Jesus' death.

John Kloppenborg's work in *Excavating Q*, proposing that Q be understood as a gospel, and one which contains no resurrection account, is suggestive of early communities who experienced no sense of theological crisis at Jesus' death. While the absence of a theological crisis within a community does not logically exclude the possibility of a resurrection experience, the absence of a resurrection account suggests a continuing commitment on the part of the community to the wisdom expressed in the sayings of the gospel.

In addition, recent work on the historical Jesus, from several quarters, including Borg, Horsely, Crossan, Patterson, and parable scholarship in Funk and Scott, which have focused on the social/political/economic reception of Jesus' words and actions, as well as on the literary analysis of the gospel texts, has disclosed an understanding of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God that is not self-referential to Jesus. Instead, these readings speak of "Jesus' program," or Jesus' critique of the politics of purity, or about his offering an alternative vision of communal life in the wake of Rome's hegemonic economic and political policies. These differing approaches call attention to Jesus' call for communities of mutual assistance and concern, for forgiveness of debts, the importance of constancy and quickness in forgiving one-another, his practice of open commensality, and so on, as ways for the peasant community, especially in the Galilee, to maintain solidarity with one another, and to assert their dignity and identity as a people of God. If these scholars are at all correct, then neither Jesus nor his disciples would have had inflated expectations of victory over Roman rule, nor would Jesus' death have been unforeseen. Thus, the earliest communities might have expected as much, and while needing time to grieve and regroup would not have lost either commitment or passion to the movement inspired by Jesus.

7. In *The Human Condition* (238–43) Hannah Arendt locates the distinctive and enduring contribution of Jesus to a theory of public life in his emphasis on forgiveness.
8. This new scholarly position is interesting in terms of two early figures in the Jesus-quest literature, Reimarus and Lessing. Reimarus assumed from his reading that Jesus indeed thought of himself as the Messiah who would free Israel from Roman oppression. Lessing thought this was a central misunderstanding on Reimarus' part; for Lessing, Christ preached a wholly spiritual, otherworldly kingdom. Current scholarship moves between these two options.
What to Make of the Textual Accounts?

It is distinctly possible, that the gospel accounts—the earliest written after 70 CE—reflect not the concerns of Jesus’ immediate followers, but of those who would come later, who would, inevitably, encounter the Cross as a scandal or stumbling block to be overcome by explanation. Paul is already addressing such outside figures in 1 Corinthians 1–3 and in Phil 2:6–11. It is quite possible, in other words, that the earliest Jesus communities experienced no acute crisis of identity in the death of Jesus, but only a call to the faithful remembrance and enactment of his teaching in light of his death. Moreover, it is possible that the appearance narratives, in all their variety, are late phenomena, addressing concerns such as authority and continuity, which I discuss below.

In contrast to at least some early Jesus communities who may have known no resurrection stories, the letters of Paul and the later gospel traditions might well have narrated either crises of the cross or stories of the apostles’ renewed affirmation of faith precisely in order to appeal to those who had not known or been part of Jesus’ early community. For such audiences, not only might the idea of a crucified savior be a contradiction in terms—needing at least some persuasive explanation as Paul acknowledges in 1 Cor 1:23; but such audiences would have no felt-experience of Jesus’ significance or continued power and presence. For such people, not only Paul’s letters, but the gospel accounts of the disciples’ doubt and confusion would be mirrors of their own uncertainties. Viewed apologetically, such stories of recommitted faith would identify with peoples’ doubts even as it urged them to belief. Such stories, moreover, would enable those later communities to stand on some equal footing with the earliest apostles, who like them had struggled with doubt.

Nonetheless, if proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection was not the beginning of Christian faith and witness, it proved very useful as a multivalent claim for the development of Christian communities, institutions, and a distinctive Christian worldview. In the following six sections of Part One, I suggest some of the important functions of resurrection for the Christian movement as it morphed from critic of the empire to imperial cult.

Resurrection and Authority: The Priority of Christ

If some of the earliest Jesus communities may not have needed a story of resurrection, over time they might have. Why? To read the stories of the resurrection is to read, as numerous scholars have suggested, a concern with leadership in the community after Jesus. In many of the appearance stories we see Jesus commissioning the apostles, re-establishing Peter’s authority, even bestowing

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9. I credit the particular insight on the possible “lateness” of these narratives to a recent conversation with my colleague Brandon Scott.
10. Fiorenza, 37–38. See also, J. D. Crossan, Jesus a Revolutionary Biography, 170–79.
apostolic authority on Paul. While these scholars are correct in showing how such stories function to confer authority, they often minimize the point that these stories also affirm the continuing authority of Jesus for the faith community. In the appearance narratives, it is the living Jesus who is clearly “lord” of community and who authorizes leadership. Thus, the narratives emphasize the continuity between the historical and the risen Jesus. Whatever authority the apostles will come to have, these stories suggest, it will be an authority derived from their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Moreover, whatever unity the movement possesses, such texts suggest, exists by virtue of its remaining one in Christ, and subject to his authority. A similar concern links these appearance narratives to Paul’s concern in 1 Cor 1:12–13: “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

**Resurrection as Overcoming Scandal**

The Philippians hymn (2:6–11) represents an early form of Christian propaganda that clearly identifies an alternative vision of power and social organization to that of the Roman empire. Over time, early Christians claimed that the apparent humiliation of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion was in truth the opening act in the emergence of a new, definitive, and liberating imperial drama unfolding in human history. While the death of Jesus was, at one level, a sign of Rome's imperial and unjust power, it became, more importantly, an act of humility, obedience, and faithfulness to a yet higher source of authority. In the Philippians hymn, Paul describes Jesus as the just martyr—the humble and obedient servant exalted in majesty beyond all others and with a name beyond all others: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” In using that hymn, as well as in 1 Corinthians 1–3, Paul is intent on reversing the obvious reigning assumptions about divine power as manifested in the Roman imperial cult. Paul speaks of God exalting Christ—an interesting play on rising, and ascending imagery, yet not necessarily implying resurrection.

In other places, where Paul writes of resurrection he does so in the context of affirming what happens to those who enter into the community/body of Christ—an image with political connotations. In Rom 12:4–8, for example, Paul seems to suggest that Christ is raised in the ecclesial body of those who follow Jesus, and whose gifts are imaged as the organs of Christ’s body. In the Baptismal reflection of Rom 6, Paul intentionally blurs the line between Christ's death and resurrection and that of the new follower who is made new by entering into the Body of Christ and becoming “alive to God in Christ Jesus.” And, in Rom 8:29 when Paul speaks of Christ’s resurrection and his being “the firstborn within a large family”—and in the context of moving from present suffering to future glory—there is a communal/political, this-worldly edge to the transformation he says is underway. Participating in the reality of Christ creates a new
worldview, a new set of priorities, and an abiding connection to the fate of the cosmos itself (1 Cor 15).

Resurrection and the Christ/Logos Narrative

In its encounter with the Greco-Roman/Hellenistic communities over the course of the first several generations, the expansion of the Jesus narrative moved not only in the direction of resurrection, but also pre-existence. The Colossians’ hymn (1:15–17), the prelude to John’s gospel (1:1–5), the opening of Hebrews (1:1–14) all function to expand the narrative of Jesus to that of a divine being who entered into the world of history in order to enact a cosmological drama of salvation, with implications for all the peoples of the earth. The language of rising—exaltation, resurrection and ascension—after his death is pivotal and probably pre-dates the narratives of Jesus’ pre-existence, which developed to complement the earlier affirmations of Jesus being raised by God. The function of this expanded narrative, of course, was to further shape the interpretation of Jesus’ life, which now became his “earthly existence,” or, part of the larger cosmological story. This expanded narrative addresses the question of Jesus’ humiliating death, by making it the centerpiece of a now-divine narrative.

In the writings of Justin around 160, we see evidence of mapping the expanding narrative of the cosmological savior onto a quasi-Platonic understanding of reality. To be sure, one could find hints of that eternal/temporal mapping in Paul’s language of flesh and spirit, in the play of foolishness and wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1–3 and 2 Corinthians 10–13, as well as in Paul’s use of allegory in Galatians (4:21–31). But Paul was a rhetor, not a philosopher. Justin, however, specifically invokes Plato and Aristotle, arguing that while their wisdom “participated” in the logos, Christians worshipped the “whole logos” who became flesh in Jesus Christ. After Justin, one increasingly finds Christian apologists using the worldview of stoicism and Platonism as a “realistic” template on which to write the narrative of the incarnate God, who suffered at the hands of the Romans, and “the Jews,” only to rise again in vindication and victory.

By 180, the resurrection is part of Irenaeus’ Rule of Faith, an early creedal narrative designed to exclude the writings of various Christian groups whose knowledge and spirit-filled tendencies Irenaeus called Gnosticism. They, according to Irenaeus, held to a belief that the Christ, being divine, was incapable of suffering. Irenaeus saw this as a denial of Jesus’ humanity and he wrote: “The point is that there is no Christ incapable of suffering who came down upon Jesus. On the contrary, Christ himself suffered on our behalf because he was Jesus Christ, the one who died and rose, who descended and ascended—the Son of God become Son of man.”11 Those points of descent into the world and ascent back to God become the central narrative structure not only for Irenaeus’

Rule of Faith but for the second article of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. Once established in the creedal narratives, which also structure a history of salvation, interest in the historical Jesus virtually dies away. What matters to Christian Neoplatonism are the points where the divine-man enters into the temporal realm and where the divine-man returns—celebrated as the two major feasts of Christendom, Christmas and Easter.

Interestingly enough, the resurrection played no central role in the theological debates leading up to Nicaea, Constantinople or Chalcedon. Perhaps, because all four gospels have resurrection accounts (given Mark’s second ending), the emerging tradition seemed to accept Jesus’ return to the divine Father without much debate. The more difficult question that emerged with Arius in 318 was one of the initial-and-enduring relationship between the Father and the Son, the Creator and the Logos.

Resurrection in the Salvation Narrative

Paul had correctly put his finger on the most vulnerable aspect of early Christian proclamation when he said that “Christ crucified” is a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1: 23). For the early Christian apologists, the Cross had to become the central event in a divine drama of salvation; a story of incredible, unbelievable reversal in which the true identity of the crucified remains hidden until the right moment. The “right moment” for that revelation occurs at the Cross, as, for example in the centurion’s proclamation of Jesus’ identity in Mark’s gospel, or, by the time of the Apostles’ Creed, to Jesus’ descent among the dead.

It was in the underworld that the primary confrontation/trickery/divine payment between the divine-man and the devil took place. According to one version of the “rights of the devil” model of atonement, which dominated Christian theology until the eleventh century, it was just as Jesus was taken into the underworld by Satan that Jesus sprang the trap and revealed his true identity as the sinless God-Man. Because Satan held by right only those who had sinned, his taking of Jesus into Hades broke the contract. Jesus’ resurrection is a celebration of victory and a rising of all the dead who now chose to follow him.

In the various atonement theories (at least in the rights-of-the-devil model and in Anselm’s substitutionary model) resurrection functions as the structural denouement of the drama, the restoration of life in the face of all appearances to the contrary, and the successful completion of Christ’s work of salvation. Much

12. Interestingly enough, Irenaeus is one of the first apologists to turn to the synoptic gospels to demonstrate that Jesus really was a human person in the flesh. While it strikes our ears as deeply ironic that after so short a period of time following Jesus’ death many Christians believed that the truth of their faith depended on Jesus not having been an actual fully human and historical person, the fact of that situation helps us realize how influential the language of “divinity” was as a currency of significance.
later, John Calvin would express this completing quality of the resurrection as follows:

Now comes the resurrection from the dead, without which everything else would be incomplete. Because the cross, death and burial of Christ speak of weakness, faith must go beyond them all in order to become strong. So although we have complete salvation through his death, because we are reconciled to God by it, it is by his resurrection, not his death, that we are said to be born again to a living hope (1 Pet 1:3).  

Resurrection as Victory and Boundary: Overcoming “the Jews”

In the development of their salvation narrative, early Christian apologists sought to reassure Roman authorities that Christians intended no political insurrections. The Letter to Diognetus, for example, insists on the law-abiding character of Christians whose moral superiority lies in the fact that their homeland is in heaven—a position supported by Christ’s resurrection. Also, in his appeals to the Emperor and the Roman Senate, Justin Martyr partially absolves the Romans for Christ’s death because they, like others, had been deceived by “the demons.” Justin was not forgiving everyone however; in addition to the demons, he blamed Christ’s death on the Jews.

Increasingly committed to Hellenistic forms of thought, Christians from the mid-second century forward found new and important uses for the teaching of the resurrection. One of the more troubling ones can be found in Melito of Sardis’ Passover homily from around 200. In an allegory that sees the Passover of the Jewish people as a shadow or prefiguring of Christ’s death and resurrection, Melito develops a bill of indictment against the Jewish people, building to a feverish crescendo:

You [Israel], . . . voted against your Lord. The nations worshipped him. The uncircumcised marveled at him. The outlanders glorified him. Even Pilate washed his hands in this case. This one you did to death on the great feast. . . .

You did your Lord to death in the midst of Jerusalem. Listen and see, all families of the nations! An unprecedented murder has come to pass in the midst of Jerusalem, in the city of the Law, in the Hebrew city, in the prophets’ city, in the city adjudged righteous. And who has been killed? Who is the killer? I am ashamed to say and compelled to speak. . . .

God is murdered. The King of Israel is destroyed by an Israelite hand.

O unheard of murder, O unheard of injustice! . . .

When the Lord was hanged, you [Israel] did not rend your garments. . . . You deserted the Lord, you were not found by him. You cast the Lord down, you were

cast down to earth. And you—you lie dead, while he rose from the dead and went up to the heights of heaven.\textsuperscript{14}

Melito uses the resurrection to create a fundamental divide between Jews and Christians: condemnation for “the Jews” who killed their Lord, and who in doing so forfeited any claim they had to God’s covenant, and welcome to all those who believe in Christ; God’s covenant now belongs to them. Melito has the risen Christ speak the following:

So, come all families of human beings who are defiled by sins, and receive remission of sins. For I am your remission. I am the Passover of salvation. I am the Lamb sacrificed for your sake. I am your ransom. I am your life. I am your resurrection. I am your light. I am your salvation. I am your King, I lead you toward the heights of heaven. I will show you the eternal Father. I will raise you up with my right hand.

While Melito dramatically points to “the Jews’” violence in killing Christ, he himself engages in an unspeakable act of violence against them: accusing the whole of the Jewish people of murder in order to steal from them both their scriptures and God’s covenant. Because of the history of effects of Melito’s argument—especially in light of the history of Constantinian Christianity—virtually all contemporary theological arguments that emphasize the decisiveness of the resurrection for Christian faith are at least inclined toward, if not laden with, anti-Jewish supercessionism.

Resurrection in the Christian Imperial Cult

With Constantine and the later declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the empire (387), resurrection, along with Jesus’ language of the “kingdom of God,” loses its ironic and critical character and becomes a symbol of cultural fulfillment—the empire has become the kingdom of God. In one of the early, extant depictions of Christ it is unclear whether Christ is appearing as the emperor Justinian or Justinian as Christ. Along the same lines, in the 30th anniversary celebration of Constantine’s reign, Eusebius’ oration “in Praise of Constantine,” marking the event, blurs the language of King and Christ—each term interpenetrating and interpreting the other.

Today is the festival of our great emperor: and we his children rejoice, feeling the inspiration of our sacred theme. He who presides over our solemnity is the Great Sovereign himself: He, I mean, who is truly great. . . . I remember that our own victorious emperor renders praises to this Mighty Sovereign, I do well to follow him, knowing as I do that to Him alone we owe that imperial power under which we live.

Christ’s resurrection has become a political fact. With Constantine, the Philippians hymn is practically fulfilled, according to which “every tongue proclaims to the glory of God the Father, Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Now firmly established in the creedal structure of Christian faith, and, necessary, therefore, to orthodox (and legally sanctioned) belief, resurrection took on additional, internal/spiritual meaning. St. Augustine, as one example among many possible ones, in The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love, suggests that all the events of Christ’s death, burial, resurrection and ascension to God’s right hand exist as models for Christian life. Mapping his proof texts from the Pauline tradition to his Neo-Platonic understanding of reality, Augustine writes:

All the events, then, of Christ’s crucifixion, of His burial, of His resurrection the third day, of His ascension into heaven, of His sitting down at the right hand of the Father, were so ordered, that the life which the Christian leads here might be modeled upon them, not merely in a mystical sense, but in reality. For in reference to His crucifixion it is said: “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts.” And in reference to His burial: “We are buried with Him by baptism into death.” In reference to His resurrection: “That, like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of God the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life.” . . . “Set your affection on things above, not on things above, not on things on the earth.”

Living in the resurrection, for Augustine, means living with one’s whole desire/will/love directed toward the eternal, unchanging love of God, with the love of one’s self and temporal reality clearly subordinated, and rightly ordered to that higher, spiritual love.

In addition, the resurrection also served as a proof of our heavenly reward, and, in Aquinas, for example, as an argument on behalf of the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

Conclusion to Part One

While perhaps not a part of the earliest strands of response to Jesus’ death, visionary experiences, appearance narratives, sacramental stories, and simple eulogies such as “God has raised Jesus from the dead”—gathered under a common if imprecise heading of resurrection, were quite important to an emerging Jesus movement, and early Christian development, in at least four ways:

15. Augustine, St., The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love, 63–64.
16. F. Schüssler Fiorenza, Foundational Theology, 33–34. Fiorenza believes this short formula, used a total of eight times throughout the Pauline, Deutero-Pauline correspondence and I Peter is disclosive of a basic affirmation of the early Christian community.
1. whether using the language of exaltation or resurrection, many of Jesus’ early followers situated their continuing faith in Jesus within a broader vision of God’s activity;
2. for outsiders, in particular, resurrection helped rescue Jesus from the scandal of the cross even as it helped expand the narrative of Jesus into a cosmological and salvific divine-man drama;
3. resurrection provided a clear argument for the Christian movement’s Hellenistic propaganda in which it claimed to be a superior religious alternative to Judaism, and
4. resurrection provided, in combination with Christian Neoplatonism, an otherworldly orientation, both spiritually and teliologically for the Christian community.

In a broad sense, one might say that if Christianity did not actually begin with the resurrection, it did begin with the resurrection insofar as at key points of cultural and theological transition the claim of resurrection provided a central warrant for the expansion of the Jesus story into a salvific, cosmological, supersessionist, Neoplatonic, and supernatural drama.

The RESURRECTION and MODERN THEOLOGY

Background

While one might imagine that the resurrection came under sure and certain fire in the modern period that was not immediately the case. By the seventeenth century, the social and political impacts of the Reformation were coming home to Europe. If Christianity had once provided a common language (Latin) and ideology with which to bridge cultural differences, the Reformation and rise of new, legal Established Churches were now fragmenting that unified ethos. Moreover, in a time of global navigation, increasing commerce and trade, the development of national identities, expanding literacy, and the emergence of scientific inquiry, we see the need for new structures of public discourse, capable of bridging the expanding differences in culture and religion.

What is commonly taught as the age of “reason” and “revelation” was actually an appeal for, and then a struggle over, a common set of rules for negotiating the newly emerging civil society. The early English Deists, including John Locke (1632–1704)—operating within the parameters of legally binding Established Churches—sought to challenge the Established Church’s supernatural dogmas—especially the Trinity as well as the Chalcedonian dogma of the God-Man—because it was on the basis of those “higher truths” that the established churches claimed their authority and right to censor and silence public discourse. In other words, in order to challenge the temporal, civil authority of the established churches one had to critique at least the dogmatic aspects of the churches’ supernatural structure.
Nonetheless, many early Deists, however, including Locke, sought as much common ground with their Established Churches as possible, typically affirming miracles and the resurrection as proof of Jesus’ identity, and deeply committed to the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of eternal life, based upon reason. They tended to affirm what could be supported by the New Testament, while avoiding discussions of the Trinity and dogmatic formulas.

Resurrection, Modernity, and the Separation of Church and State

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, attitudes on both sides were becoming more aggressive. David Hume’s (1711–1776) critique of miracles, growing acceptance of Newton’s (1642–1727) law of gravity, and the increasing political critique of the linkage between monarchy and Established Churches (in the U.S. and in France) in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, engendered a much stronger critique of supernaturalism in large part to undercut the public power of Established Churches and Christian dogma.

Insofar as he was deeply influenced by English Deism, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) was a pivotal figure. The first portion of his *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God*, the work from which Lessing published the *Fragments* (1774–1778), was an appeal for toleration in Germany for Deism. Reimarus went farther, however, than the early Deists in his critique of the New Testament itself. Reimarus’ deeper challenge to the established Lutheran church in Germany coincides with a sharpening critique of supernaturalism in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. By the time Strauss, Marx, and Darwin had been heard from, “established” supernaturalism was under severe intellectual pressure.

For their part, modern Christian theologians writing in the eighteenth century, according to Fiorenza, sought to silence the Deists by insisting on the supernatural character of dogma, beginning with the facticity of the resurrection. About this “modern” stance in Christian theology, Fiorenza writes:

... fundamental theology sought to prove the existence of revelation by an ascending set of historical arguments. It argued from the existence of messianic prophecies to their historical fulfillment in Jesus. Then it argued from the facticity of Jesus’ miracles and of his prediction of the resurrection to the real occurrence of a physical resurrection. The resurrection was therefore the ultimate proof of Jesus’ divine mission, for it was the greatest of miracles, which had come to pass as predicted...  

If the historical objectivism of the Enlightenment sought to undermine Christianity’s claim to a supernatural revelation, then fundamental theology sought to counter the critique with a historical objectivism based upon the existence of certain ‘historical facts’—such as the empty grave—that demonstrate the truth of the resurrection and the facticity of revelation...  

[I]t became the dominant method of the Roman
school, the Latin manuals, and was at the basis of the argumentation in Vatican I’s constitution on faith.17

This awkward attempt at public theology, invoking the category of historical facts, came a cropper by the end of the nineteenth century. Fiorenza credits historical scholarship with undermining the attempt to justify revelation on objective historical grounds. He quotes from Adolf Harnack’s History of Dogma that when confronting “the assertion that the resurrection of Christ is the most certain fact in the history of the world, one does not know whether he should marvel more at its thoughtlessness or its unbelief.”18

As Christian establishments lost ground both in the U.S. and throughout Europe, they faced a dramatic reversal of fortunes. While at the beginning of the eighteenth century Christian establishments were fully in control of civil society throughout Europe, by the nineteenth century the situation had begun to turn, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the battle had been completely lost. In response, Christian traditionalists withdrew from the public arena; unable to set the rules for public discourse, they withdrew from the game, receding to a discourse of the faith community. Thus one finds at about the same time in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Vatican sharpening its arguments about Papal infallibility and the heresies of Modernism, Americanism, and so on, as well some Protestants shaping their arguments for a fundamentalist Christianity.

One need not go to these extremes to witness the rhetoric of retreat from the public scene. In the writings of both Albert Schweitzer and Martin Kähler one can see this pattern quite clearly vis-a-vis historical Jesus scholarship. Schweitzer’s claim that his eschatological reading of Jesus is more historical than others because it does not collapse Jesus into a figure of our own time (Schweitzer’s version of the dissimilarity criterion) is simply false. What Jesus could be more perfectly suited to a Christianity that has withdrawn from public discourse than a Jesus who preached an “eschatological worldview,” whose “world-negating” character is, according to Schweitzer “appropriate . . . to any world,” and certainly, for Schweitzer, the modern world.

For his part, Kähler acknowledges that he seeks to establish a “sturmfrei Gebiet” (an invulnerable area) for Christian faith against the attacks of a rationalistic and secularist culture.19 As one might expect, for Kähler the resurrection remained powerful and essential for Christian faith. Writes Kähler:

The real Christ, that is, the Christ who has exercised an influence in history, with whom millions have commune in childlike faith, and with them the great wit-

17. Schüessler Fiorenza, Foundational Theology, 6–7.
nesses of faith have been in communion—while striving, apprehending, triumphing, and proclaiming—"this real Christ is the Christ who is preached." The Christ who is preached, however, is the Christ of faith. He is the Jesus whom the eyes of faith behold at every step he takes and every syllable he utters—the Jesus whose image we impress upon our minds because we both would and do commune with him, our risen, living Lord.  

While Karl Barth located his own awareness of the _Krisis_ of theology with the outbreak of World War I—a _Krisis_ rooted in the failure of human experience and knowledge to provide a true basis for theology—the actual roots of his despair may lay in the separation of church and state, and in the loss of ecclesial power to dominate and censor public life and discourse. While Barth knows he cannot return to those days, his theological project was designed, as Kähler had also intended, to insulate the traditional dogmas of the faith from the acids of modern inquiry. The effect of these moves was to argue that the church itself constituted a kind of true society—over against the "secular" world. In recent years, the clearest example of this approach has been Luke Timothy Johnson's _The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels_, aimed, in particular, at the Jesus Seminar. 

Other theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth century were not so sure that such rigid boundaries between church and society were either realistic or helpful. As Fiorenza comments: "De facto, within the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Hermann, and in our century Tillich and Ebeling have sought to ground the faith of Christianity not in the resurrection, but in the life and ministry of Jesus." To this list, of course, one could add minimally: Küng, Schillebeeckx, Elizabeth and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, McFague as well as a broad range of feminist and liberationist scholars—all using various methodological approaches, and varying commitments to the value of historical Jesus research. 

My point in this second part of the essay is that a contemporary theologian's view of the resurrection is keenly influenced by the theologian's—perhaps unconscious—response to the separation of church and state. As a result of an epochal shift by which established churches could no longer legally and politically control civil society, churches and theologians faced a new and fundamental decision about the shape of their discourse. Prior to the separation of church and state, a theologian could imagine public discourse as a unity with

22. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to nuance the methodological distinctions in these—and other, related—theological approaches, I highly recommend F. Schüssler Fiorenza's _Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church_ for a close-up review of the significant differences in these, and other, theological approaches.
the church providing not only the fundamental story about reality but also the legal and political means of enforcing that story. Legal “toleration” had made exceptions for some groups, but such toleration never involved the established church ceding authority over the public sphere to other religious bodies.

In the wake of separation, however, a theologian has to ask whether Christian theology should participate in the new public square as one conversation partner among others, or, in order to protect its truth claims from public inquiry, should theology treat the church as a distinct public in which its claims retain the force of truth?

One can imagine the basic options facing churches and theologians as existing on a continuum or scale with the following positions:

1. at one end of the continuum, rejection: ignore the modern world, and describe it as basically sinful;
2. at the other end of the continuum, absorption: the new discourses of a rational civil society shape decisively which faith claims are affirmed and how;
3. in the middle of the continuum varying strategies of accommodation in which the new discourses of civil society influence and affect, but do not determine the interpretation of theological claims.23

Not only fundamentalists and Vatican I Catholics would operate in the first group, but also the contemporary movement of Falwell-like fundamentalists, evangelicals and religious conservatives who have been seeking greater political influence through a kind of populist, de facto Christian America. For them, the resurrection is vital to Christian faith precisely because it offends modern reason, which they associate with intellectual and political liberalism.

At the opposite end of the spectrum would be theological liberals, Unitarians, and Christian humanists who find in the separation of church and state perhaps the most important moral achievement of modernity. For them, belief in the resurrection would be relatively marginal to faith in comparison with Jesus’ teaching, political-religious courage, his social solidarity with the outcast, and so on.

23. My categories of “rejection,” “absorption,” and “accommodation” are from James Gustafson’s book *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt*. Gustafson is concerned with mapping the intersections between Christian theology and ethics and other intellectual disciplines. Insofar as he points to examples in Calvin and Jonathan Edwards of theologians negotiating different explanations of events, he does not see the separation of church and state as itself a crisis that generates the options of “rejection,” “absorption,” and “accommodation.” My response would be that between the Constantinian period and prior to the separation of church and state in the modern period other rational, public modes of explanation had to be at least reconcilable with the official statements of the church. Such explanations either had to accommodate themselves to church teaching or be absorbed by church teaching. They thus posed no identity crisis in the church in the way that the separation of church and state did.
Among the third group of accommodationists, one can imagine a further subdivision between those whose accommodation would still tilt towards the tradition (postliberals) and those who would emphasize the importance of the current cultural situation (revisionists). Let’s take a closer look at this third grouping.

Contemporary theologians influenced by Kähler and Barth, such as postliberal theologians, tend to treat the Church as a distinct “public” or “culture” over against secular society, and thus tilt toward a rejection model. Nonetheless, insofar as they affirm the various disciplines of human knowledge and seek to explain their relation to the saving knowledge of faith they can be understood as accommodationists. These theologians, while offering a variety of specific interpretations of the resurrection—and while not theological traditionalists—will all “proclaim” the resurrection as a Christian fact and distinguish themselves from liberal theologians who, in their view, tend to reduce the resurrection to human projection. In other words, the resurrection is used to sharpen the difference between being a Christian and being merely a modern citizen, and is viewed as central to Christian faith. To paraphrase Will Willimon who quipped in a recent Easter sermon: we’re not like the fellows of the Jesus Seminar for whom the resurrection means: it’s like he never went away.

Theologians, on the other hand, who believe that the emergence of a broad civil society, with intellectual freedom, is a fundamentally important and helpful change—for the church as well as for society—tend to view the church and society either in a kind of mutually critical conversation (Tracy) or as both in need of social transformation (feminist and liberationist theologies). For such theologians, the resurrection will also be affirmed, but in ways that attend quite seriously to philosophical and cultural discourses. Tillich’s distinction between “technical” and “ontological reason,” for example, asked about the resurrection: what does such a claim mean for human existence? Focus on meaning, through hermeneutics, speech-act theory, and so on, have been influential in shaping the theological issue of resurrection away from a kind crude empiricism: did the resurrection really happen, to the issue of how such a claim on the part of the early Christian community can illuminate our contemporary experience. Thus, for this group of theologians, one seeks to use the resurrection to connect the experience of faith to the broader, public experience of being in the world. While symbolically rich, the resurrection is interpreted for such theologians within a broader hermeneutic of God’s activity and mission in the world. It is less important to believe that the resurrection happened in a certain way than it is for one to be part of God’s renewing, justice-making activity in the world.

As at the outset of the Christian movement, where we encountered various motives and modalities for affirming, or not, what came to be called the resurrection of Jesus, so in the modern and contemporary periods discussions and

24. As Gustafson points out, Barth and Lindbeck can also be understood as pursuing a kind of absorptionist position from the side of religion. See An Examined Faith, 59–65.
debates about resurrection are often about something else—e.g., political power in the wider public realm, claims to authority within the life and structure of the church, negotiating intellectual and moral coherence with other intellectual disciplines, and so on. Acknowledging these wider interests in the question of “resurrection” and “origins” is a necessary and helpful aspect of our continuing Westar conversations.

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Did Christianity begin at the resurrection? Put differently: did Christianity originate primarily as a result of the (visionary) experiences that certain followers of Jesus had and interpreted as appearances of the risen Jesus? Henk Jan de Jonge argues to the contrary that “the core of their conviction [which] lay in their belief that God was causing his rule to dawn” provided the framework for the followers of Jesus to interpret their “visions” as “appearances” of the risen Jesus, for this “core of their conviction” enabled them to believe—as did many Jews in the first century—that God vindicates those who die faithful to God. This “Easter faith” results specifically from the belief in the Kingdom of God, and in effect is prior to the visionary experiences, providing (at the least) the context for interpreting them. Thus “the movement after Jesus’ death was the continuation of that which had begun before it in response to his person, preaching and actions.” While de Jonge opts for the response to Jesus over visionary experience as the explanation for the beginning of Christianity, others opt for some combination of the effect of the ministry of Jesus, visionary or ecstatic experiences among his followers, and interaction with the religious-

1. H. J. de Jonge, “Visionary Experience and the Historical Origins of Christianity,” 35, citing (n. 3) R. Bultmann, W. Marxsen, and U. Wilckens. See Bultmann, Theologie des neuen Testaments, 47–48; Marxsen, “The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical and Theological Problem,” 15–50 (esp. 34); Wilckens, “The Tradition-history of the Resurrection of Jesus,” 51–76 (esp. 61). A similar logic may be found in the more recent thinking of G. Lüdemann who argues (1) that the appearances to Peter and to Paul were due to historically explainable psychological phenomena, with the result (2) that “we can no longer be Christians even if we wanted to, for Jesus did not rise from the dead” (The Resurrection of Christ, 204). This implies, as Marxsen wrote, that to ask about the resurrection of Jesus is to ask about the foundation of the Church—“and indeed the question of that foundation both in historical terms as well as in present fact” (“Historical Problem,” 15).
2. de Jonge, “Visionary Experience,” 49.
cultural environments of the first century. Along these lines, Larry Hurtado appeals to both the impact of Jesus and revelatory religious experiences (presumably of the post-mortem Jesus), and other “forces/factors” as well, to account for the rise of what he calls “Christ-devotion.”

On the other hand, those who contest the historical and theoretical viability of the story of origins presented by the New Testament itself seek to redescribe the beginnings of Christianity using “anthropology, social history, and the human sciences, in disciplined ways that do not simply reproduce, by continuing to paraphrase, the dominant (essentially Lukan) paradigm of Christian origins.” One alternative theory of Christian origins sees the generative impulse in the self-aware social experimentation and mythmaking of different Jesus/Christ groups. Thus even the presupposition of an “overwhelming something at the very beginning of the Christian time,” a “something” which can be claimed as the impetus (whether singular or manifold) for the beginning of early Christianity, is under dispute.

But even conceding this disputed point, there are still serious problems with the view that “Christianity began at the resurrection of Jesus,” especially its capacity to explain the variety represented by Christian origins. To what extent can the resurrection of Jesus be regarded as the foundational impetus for a diverse range of movements, not all of which show evidence that it was part of (let alone fundamental to) their structure of beliefs? (Herein, by “Christianity” is meant the entire range of groups conventionally treated under the heading “Christian origins,” including those groups for which evidence is lacking for the use of the term Christos or for subscription to the passion-resurrection kerygma.) The tendency, as this paper will illustrate, is to defend the thesis by dismissing, either as aberrant or as implicitly consensual, texts or groups showing evidence of divergence.

These are precisely the problems with views such as those represented by the following excerpts.

I still believe […] that the best historical explanation for the rise of the multi-faceted phenomenon we know as early Christianity is the combination of an empty tomb

5. L. W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity: Four “forces/factors” drove and shaped the development of “Christ-devotion”: (1) Jewish exclusivist monotheism; (2) the impact of Jesus; (3) revelatory religious experiences; and (4) the encounter with the larger religious environment.
8. “The pluriformity of the Jesus groups, together with the variety of mythologies they produced, is a very important recognition in recent scholarship. It is no longer possible to posit a monolinear trajectory of development, true to a single, original impulse from which these many different groups must be thought of as divergent. Pluriformity signifies social experimentation as well as thoughtful rationalization” (Cameron and Miller, “Introduction,” 20).
and the sightings of Jesus himself bodily alive (though in a transformed, not merely resuscitated, body) for a month or so after his crucifixion; and that the best explanation for the empty tomb and the sightings is the proposal that Jesus was indeed fully alive again and that his body had been transformed into what I have called a “transphysical” state.\(^9\)

That belief [in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead] seems to have been not only fundamental for Christianity as far back as we can trace, but also presuppositional and foundational. […] As a historical statement we can say quite firmly: no Christianity without the resurrection of Jesus. As Jesus is the great single “presupposition” of Christianity, so also is the resurrection of Jesus.\(^10\)

This paper will outline how the resurrection of Jesus functions in such arguments, how it becomes the \textit{sine qua non} for the rise of Christianity. The article will then detail several points at which these arguments run into difficulty.

\textbf{The RESURRECTION of JESUS as the \textit{sine qua non} of CHRISTIAN ORIGINS}

\textbf{N. T. Wright}

In his multivolume work \textit{Christian Origins and the Question of God}, N. T. Wright makes his case for the view that the resurrection of Jesus—not merely early Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus—is “the best historical explanation for the rise of the multi-faceted phenomenon we know as early Christianity.”\(^11\) While the intent of the third volume in Wright’s series, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, is to prove that the Easter event (which Wright thinks was understood unequivocally and unanimously by early Christians as the bodily resurrection of Jesus out of the tomb and his appearances for several weeks thereafter to his followers) is the best explanation of the rise of Easter faith,\(^12\) this point need not detain us here. However belief in the resurrection of Jesus was generated, the question at hand is how that belief functions in arguments such as Wright’s about the beginnings of Christianity. Elsewhere Wright explains his argument using the analogy of a bridge: if faced with a pillar on one side of a river (first-century Judaism) and another on the other side (first-century Christianity), we must ask “what sort of bridge might actually join the two together. Christianity emerged from Judaism, but how did this happen?”\(^13\) For Wright, only the resurrection of Jesus can explain the precise modifications of first-century Judaism that comprise the beginnings of Christianity.\(^14\)

\(^10\) J. D. G. Dunn, \textit{Jesus Remembered}, 826.
\(^12\) Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 3–10.
\(^14\) One could (equally justifiably) ask what sort of pillars are required to support the bridge if the bridge has to be the resurrection of Jesus.
The argument takes several forms. First, early Christians proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had arrived despite the fact that nothing like the liberation of Israel (what “Kingdom of God” would have meant to first century Jews) had happened. They did so not because they had “demythologized, dejudaeized, spiritualized, or hellenized” the current apocalyptic meaning of “kingdom of God,” but because Jesus had been raised from the dead, which must signify the coming of the eschaton (though this had to be significantly redefined). Second, early Christianity proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah despite the fact that he looked nothing like the messiahs of the different variations of Jewish messianic expectation, none of which “envisaged a Messiah who would die at the hands of the pagans.” In Wright’s view, Jesus’ resurrection alone cannot explain why he came to be proclaimed by early Christians as the Messiah. This resulted as much from his actions and teachings during his lifetime as from his death as a messianic pretender, though had the story ended here (as so many others did) his followers would not have continued to hold him as Israel’s anointed one. That early Christians were and continued to be messianic (while redefining the category of messiah entirely) can only be explained by the fact “that Jesus, following his execution on a charge of being a would-be Messiah, had been raised from the dead.” Third, early Christianity began as a resurrection movement, and “there is no evidence for a form of early Christianity in which the resurrection was not a central belief.” For Jews who believed in the resurrection of the dead, that belief concerned the ideas “both that the dead would be alive again with new or renewed bodies and that the Age to Come had at last been inaugurated.” Thus the early Christians “did not behave as though they had had a new sort of religious experience or as if their former leader was alive and well in the presence of God, whether as an angel or a spirit or whatever. The only explanation for their behaviour, their stories, their symbols, and their theology is that they really believed Jesus had been reembodied, that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead.”

To the first point, that the proclamation of the presence of the Kingdom of God required belief in Jesus’ resurrection as the beginning of the age to come, it is equally plausible that members of the earliest Jesus movements carried on Jesus’ proclamation of God’s Kingdom because Jesus had begun that proclama-
tion and because they, both in their recollection of his teachings, relationships, and activities and in their performance of his sayings in the context of communities oriented to following him, continued to experience the Kingdom as announced and enacted by him and so carried on his project of announcing and enacting the Kingdom. Wright wants to say more than this, however. He holds that (1) the Kingdom of God, within its Jewish context, cannot rightly be understood non-eschatologically; and (2) because the early Christians announced that the Kingdom had come, they must have believed that the eschaton had come; and (3) the best explanation for that is that they believed the eschatological resurrection had already taken place in God’s raising of Jesus from the dead. Each step here is open to debate, but Wright implies that the eschatological consciousness which characterized (also a disputed point) the beginnings of Christianity cannot be explained apart from the resurrection of Jesus. The third point, that early Christianity was characteristically a resurrection movement, is really a restatement of the first: both turn on the premise that the eschatological resurrection had already occurred with the resurrection of Jesus.22

Supporting Wright’s view that early Christians would not have proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah if he had stayed dead, are two distinct assumptions: first, that the crucifixion of Jesus required his followers to believe that God had vindicated his life and death in some way; and second, that other possible modes of vindication besides individualized bodily resurrection lack both evidence in the sources and the power to explain the proclamation of Jesus as “the Christ.” Jesus’ messianic identity is indispensable to Wright’s argument, for whereas other categories of vindication (e.g., martyrdom) are appropriate for other sorts of figures, a martyred messiah who stays dead is a failed messiah.23 A third assumption is also implied in Wright’s point that the early Christians persisted in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, “cheerfully redrawing the picture of messiahship around him but refusing to abandon it.”24 That is, the resurrection of Jesus allowed, or required, the early Christians to rethink messianic language and expectations altogether. This also applies to the ongoing proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the belief that the eschatological resurrection had occurred. Thus the resurrection of Jesus provided the crucial hermeneutical shift which allowed the early Christians to rethink and reformulate traditional ideas of Kingdom, resurrection, and Messiah. For Wright, to the extent that the modifications of first-century Judaism by early followers of Jesus make up the distinctive features of early Christianity, this new resurrection hermeneutic was what caused Christianity to begin.

22. Wright sees that his points about the Kingdom and about the eschatological resurrection are one and the same: see Wright, Resurrection, 568.
23. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 658.
James D. G. Dunn

Though Wright would agree with Dunn’s statement that there is “no Christianity without the resurrection of Jesus,” Dunn in the above citation seems to be offering a description of the belief system of early Christianity, not mounting an argument explaining the origin of Christianity. His point is that no early Christian group can be isolated that did not hold that God had raised Jesus from the dead (this will be considered in detail below). But Dunn also argues in Jesus Remembered that it was “the impact made by Jesus” during his mission that was “the primary formative force in shaping the Jesus tradition,” noting that “the impulse to formulate tradition was not first effective in the post-Easter period.” Yet there is a “very substantive continuity between Jesus’ mission and what followed,” that is, earliest Christianity. This continuity was possible because Jesus’ mission ended not in failure, but in resurrection. Thus Dunn can say both (1) that “it is impossible reasonably to dispute that the movement which became known as Christianity has been the most direct and lasting effect of [Jesus’]work,” and (2) that “it is almost impossible reasonably to doubt that the sequel to Jesus’ mission began with different members of his disciple group(s) seeing Jesus alive, seeing him as ‘risen from the dead’.” The “impact of Jesus” therefore includes his resurrection as the main generating impulse of early Christianity. So the resurrection of Jesus is “fundamental,” “presuppositional,” and “foundational” to earliest Christianity, a claim made by Dunn elsewhere in earlier work.

But besides being “foundational,” the resurrection of Jesus was also, according to Dunn, a universal belief among all early Christians. Thus in the above citation, he notes the counter-example of Q and dismisses it: “any claims to disentangle a Jesus movement which did not celebrate Jesus’ resurrection inevitably have to assume what they are trying to prove (petitio principii), since all the data available (including Q) were retained by churches which did celebrate his resurrection.” It simply does not follow, however, that the retention of Q by

25. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 826.
26. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 882.
27. Jesus Remembered, 891.
29. Jesus Remembered, 891.
30. Jesus Remembered, 826.
31. For instance, see Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, 132, and Dunn, Evidence for Jesus, 60, 75.
32. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 826. Dunn retains some doubts about reconstructing Q as a literary text and identifying it with the entirety of what he calls “q [sic] material,” some of which at least he thinks may derive from oral tradition (ibid., 148–49); see also Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting,” 163–64 and Dunn, “Q as Oral Tradition,” 45–69. Cf. Wright, “Resurrection in Q?” Wright says that, like the risen Jesus, Q “only appears to those who believe in it, and perhaps it takes a special literary-critical grace to have that sort of faith or experience” (88), and likens his own agnosticism about Q to that of other scholars about the resurrection of Jesus (87, 97). Wright himself prefers the idea of “‘Q material’, floating traditions to which Matthew and Luke both had access, [rather than] a solid and reconstructible document” (New Testament and the People of God, 441).
Matthew and Luke disallows Q as evidence for a group that “did not celebrate Jesus’ resurrection.” Dunn’s concern is with the idea that Q represents the sum of its community’s theology: he takes issue especially with “the assumption that Q somehow defines its community,” that is, that the community “holds to this material in distinction from (defiance of?) other communities who are similarly defined by their document.” He calls this the “one document per community’ fallacy.” Surely any given early Christian community neither would be bound to one document to the exclusion of all other texts (analogy: the Qumran group), nor would include all they knew or believed in a single text for which they were responsible. Dunn does not dispute that “behind Q stands a Q community,” but does question whether we can say anything at all about what the Q community may or may not have believed. He takes up the question of a “soteriological” approach to Jesus’ death, but equally important is the fact that Q does not refer to the resurrection of Jesus. On neither topic is Q’s silence simply to be dismissed. For if a document originated in a single community, even if that document was intended to be used alongside (in supplementation of) other texts and traditions, how is the absence of a fundamental, presuppositional, and universal belief to be explained? But dismissing the significance of this absence in Q, or disputing that absence altogether, clears the way for claims such as Dunn’s about the universality of resurrection faith in early Christianity.

Summary

We may now highlight the following premises critical to the arguments of Wright and Dunn:

- No group within early Christianity can be isolated which did not believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead; belief in Jesus’ resurrection was

33. This is simply stated by Dunn, but argued by Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 243: if Matthew and Luke “added to Q no explicit references to the resurrection, this suggests that they saw no reason for concern about Q on this point. That is, they too must have been comfortable with Q’s construal of Jesus’ death and vindication, and they likely presumed that it implicitly reflected belief that Jesus was raised from death and that they would be vindicated likewise.” But this does not follow: Q’s contents were subsumed into a Markan framework (expanded by both Matthew and Luke with additional resurrection stories) that articulated resurrection as the mode of Jesus’ divine vindication, so that any editorial correction of individual Q sayings by Matthew or Luke would be completely unnecessary, unless they explicitly denied the resurrection of Jesus.

34. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 150 (emphasis original).

35. Jesus Remembered, 150–51.

36. Jesus Remembered, 149.


38. As by Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 826.

39. As by Wright, “Resurrection in Q?”

40. Along similar lines, see Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 226–33, on questions about Q’s community, and the passion-resurrection kerygma. Both Hurtado and Dunn (Jesus Remembered, 151) refer to Kloppenborg, Excavating Q, 363–79.
such an essential characteristic of early Christian identity that one can say “no Christianity without the resurrection of Jesus.”

- The persistence of Christianity as a characteristically messianic movement following the Roman execution of Jesus as a messianic pretender is best explained on the basis of the belief that God had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead.
- The rise of certain distinguishing characteristics of early Christianity is best explained on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus, which provided a hermeneutical shift responsible for the characteristic early Christian reformulations of certain facets of early Judaism.

If the views of Wright and Dunn are presented fairly in the above discussion, it becomes apparent that the ability of these global premises to support an argument that “Christianity” began at the resurrection depends on how well they cover the textual evidence for Christian origins.

SOME FLIES in the OINTMENT

Q and an Alternative Model for Jesus’ Vindication

Outlining possible ways that early followers of Jesus could have conceptualized his vindication after death, Dunn notes that the categories (1) translation or rapture, (2) vindication/exaltation, and (3) resurrection were readily available. In Dunn’s view, the first category did not commend itself because “translation excluded death,” while the second was “typically . . . combined with (rather than understood as an alternative to) the predominant category of resurrection.” Though resurrection was usually imagined in corporate and “final” (that is, eschatological or apocalyptic) terms, the early Christians thought it the most fitting category for accounting for what had happened to Jesus (individual and non-final). While Dunn is correct that resurrection was the predominant category, there are hints in the early Christian literature that other models were also entertained and found to be helpful in conceptualizing Jesus’ post-mortem vindication.

In a 1985 essay, Dieter Zeller observed that Q 13:34–35, the Jerusalem logion, contains language of disappearance (“not-seeing”) such as was commonly used.

41. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 826.
42. Jesus Remembered, 866–70. This threefold typology was also presented by G. Lohfink, “Der Ablauf der Osterereignisse und die Anfänge der Urgemeinde,” 162–76 (esp. 168–69).
43. Jesus Remembered, 867.
44. Jesus Remembered, 868.
45. Jesus Remembered, 868. Dunn notes (869–70) Rom 1:3–4, 1 Cor 15:20, 23, and Matt 27:52–53 as evidence that the “earliest articulation of resurrection faith” was corporate and final.
in Hellenistic stories about the translation or assumption of human or divine persons into the divine realm.46

(34) Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her—how many times I have desired to gather together your children, just as a hen gathers her nestlings under her wings, but you were unwilling. (35) Behold, your house is being abandoned. I tell you, you will not see me until [the time] comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”47

The “not-seeing” language (οὐ μὴ ἴδητε με, v. 35) is similar to that found in assumption narratives, for instance in the story about the assumption of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:12 LXX (καί οὐκ εἶδεν αὐτῶν ἐτί); it expresses the idea of bodily disappearance that was typical in assumption narratives.48 Zeller noticed also the combination, typical in Jewish assumption speculation, of assumption language with a special eschatological function,49 and argued that a close parallel can be found in the conclusion to the Similitudes of Enoch, in which Enoch is taken into heaven and identified with “that Son of Man” (1 Enoch 71:14, though the text is problematic).50 Q 13:35 also assumes the speaker’s foreknowledge of assumption, another standard feature in such stories.51 Supporting evidence for the importance of this correlation between assumption and return to the Q redactor can be found in the way that parables about absent and suddenly returning masters are twice connected redactionally with coming Son of Man sayings (Q 12:39–40 + 12:42–46; Q 17:23–37 + Q 19). This is suggestive of the correlation between “assumption” (especially, consequent absence) and “eschatological function” (namely, return as judge) noted above.52

Though Zeller thought Q 13:34–35 “bypasses” the death of Jesus, because assumption is normally an escape from death,53 a plausible case can be made for the view that assumption language in Q 13:35 is providing a schema of post-mortem vindication.54 First, though the saying does not reference Jesus’ death directly, Q 13:34 uses deuteronomistic language about the violent fate

46. Dieter Zeller, “Entrückung zur Ankunft als Menschensohn (Lk 13, 34f.; 11, 29f.),” 513–30; see also Kloppenborg, Excavating Q, 377–79.
48. Negated forms of ὄραω can also be found, for example, in assumption stories concerning Xisouthros (Berossos, Babylon. frag. 4α: οὐκ ἐτί ὄραημα), Romulus (Plutarch, Rom. 27.5: οὐτε μέρος ὄραημα σωμάτας), and “Proteus” (Lucian, Perg. 39: οὐ μην ἐωράατο γε).
51. See 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 10; 1 Enoch 81:6; 4 Ezra 14; 2 Baruch 76:1–5.
of the prophets to describe the rejection of the speaker by “Jerusalem.” Given evidence in Q for a knowledge of Jesus’ death,\textsuperscript{55} the saying here probably refers to Jesus’ death (albeit obliquely), so that the speaker’s return is both post-assumption and post-mortem. This inference leads to a second point: although assumption was normally considered an escape from death in Jewish literature, post-mortem assumptions (especially disappearances of corpses) were common in Greco-Roman literature, and were usually considered evidence for the apotheosis of the person who disappeared. There are also indications from various Jewish texts that assumption language could also be applied, either realistically or metaphorically, to individuals who had died.\textsuperscript{56} Third, while the Jewish tradition appears to have resisted the Greek connection of assumption and apotheosis,\textsuperscript{57} the idea of divine favour at least is inescapable.\textsuperscript{58} Given that the person taken away by assumption to the divine realm was thought of as being reserved in heaven until their eschatological role be revealed, it is valid to infer from the assumption motif not only special divine favour but also exaltation (and therefore vindication in a case like that of Jesus).

A similar approach to Jesus’ post-mortem vindication can perhaps be seen behind Mark 16:1–8, which (like Q 13:34–35) focuses not on the risen Jesus present in the appearances, but on the crucified Jesus absent through disappearance.\textsuperscript{59} The typical way to interpret an empty (emptied) tomb in antiquity was to conclude that the gods or God had taken the dead person away (as in

\textsuperscript{55} The Cross Saying (Q 14:27) implies such a knowledge, as also does the connection Q makes between the rejection of John and Jesus and the shedding of the blood of prophets, for both of which “this generation” is held responsible (Q 7:31–35; 11:49–51).

\textsuperscript{56} For a Jewish example of a “metaphorical” application of assumption language to a dead person, see Wis 4:10–11: “Becoming well-pleasing to God, and he was loved by him; and while living among sinners he was translated (μετετέθη). He was taken away (ησόταγη) lest evil pervert his understanding, or guile mislead his soul.” (Both μετατίθημι and ἁρπάζω are technical terms for assumption.) Here the text does not express a “realistic” assumption and accompanying bodily disappearance, but rather only the idea that “God took away” the righteous one (as a euphemism for death). On Wisdom 4–5, see Smith, Post-Mortem Vindication, 81–84. Other uses of assumption language describe the disappearance of the body. For post-mortem examples see T. Job 39:11–12 (Job’s children); see also Prot. Jas. 23–24 (Zechariah), and the various late legends about Mary (Smith, Post-Mortem Vindication, 89–92).

\textsuperscript{57} Philo’s view of Moses’ apotheosis as a result of his ascent of Sinai is a good counter-example (Vit. Mos. 1.158); thus Philo thought it fitting that Moses should meet the same end as Enoch and Elijah (Quaest. in Gen. 1.86; Sacr. 3.8).

\textsuperscript{58} See, prototypically for the Jewish tradition, Gen 5:24 LXX: “Enoch became well-pleasing (εὐφρέστησεν) to God, and he was not found, because God had translated (μετεθηκεν) him.”

\textsuperscript{59} See further Smith, “Revisiting,” 128–35. Mark 16:4 juxtaposes resurrection language (ἡγέσθη) with the “not-finding” motif common in assumption narratives; Mark 16:6 (cf. 14:28), which singles out Peter, is probably a redactional nod to the appearance traditions such as preserved in 1 Cor 15:5–7.
Chariton 3.3). This reading of Mark 16:1–8 as a “disappearance” story was first proposed by Elias Bickermann, who thought that assumption-exaltation was the earlier view of Jesus’ post-mortem vindication, and that the idea of resurrection—more agreeable to Hellenistic circles familiar with myths about dying and rising gods—quickly caught on and overshadowed it completely. Bickermann’s view, despite its problems, illustrates the difficulty in evaluating the significance of Q’s use of assumption language: how does it relate to early Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection?

For Q, which shows evidence of a belief in a future general resurrection (Q 11:31–32) but not of applying individualized resurrection to Jesus as a category of post-mortem vindication, it is important at least on a literary level that this strategy, which John Kloppenborg calls the death-assumption-judgment scenario, evidently was considered useful in explaining how Jesus, the rejected and murdered envoy of Wisdom, could be claimed to be the “Coming One” (Q 3:16b; 7:19; 13:35), that is, the eschatological Son of Man. While resurrection could be interpreted as a reversal of Jesus’ wrongful death, or as an indication (as Wright claims) that the eschatological age had begun, there is a more direct connection between assumption and eschatological function as judge (according to the standard Jewish “logic”) than between resurrection and such a function. However, it may be that Q’s use of this strategy simply represents conceptual experimentation with the problem of vindication, and does not represent a foundational insight. Other texts, both Greek and Jewish, show evidence of applying (after the fact) assumption language or narratives to persons who were already considered divine (in the Greek tradition) or who were thought to have some significant revelatory or forensic eschatological function (in the Jewish tradition). But if Q introduces the assumption of Jesus as a way of explaining (after the fact) why he was expected as the eschatological Son of Man, then an explanation of how that expectation originated in the Q community is lacking. This could indicate not that the framers Q were ignorant of traditions

63. Some examples: (1) archaeological evidence for the veneration of Herakles as a god predates pictorial and textual evidence for stories about his funeral pyre assumption and apotheosis; (2) Callimachus wrote a funeral elegy acclamation describing the post-mortem assumption and apotheosis of Arsinoe II Philadelphos, who already during her lifetime was venerated with her husband Ptolemy II Philadelphos as the THEOI ADELPHOI; (3) both Ezra and Baruch, eschatological seers, are forewarned of their assumption and told to use the intervening time to instruct the elect in 4 Ezra 14 and 2 Bar 76:1–5. For further examples, literature, and discussion, see Smith, “Revisiting,” 128 and nn. 24–26; Smith, Post-Mortem Vindication, 58–60, 79–80, 93.  
64. This is because there is no evidence for a resurrection-exaltation-enthronement scenario in Q. See Kloppenborg, Excavating Q, 376–77, referring especially to Norman Perrin, “The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition.”
about Jesus’ resurrection,⁶⁵ but rather that they preferred the assumption model because of its theological and eschatological implications.

Actually, the connection with Mark 16:1–8 raises a potential problem with seeing assumption language in Q as evidence for an alternative to resurrection for conceptualizing Jesus’ post-mortem vindication. Since the normal conclusion to draw from an empty tomb was assumption, not resurrection, it is possible that Q 13:35 was formulated on the basis of rumours or traditions about an empty tomb—in which case “assumption” in Q is not an equally primitive alternative to resurrection, but a secondary derivation, or even an aberration, from resurrection belief. The answer to this problem depends in part on the origin of the empty tomb traditions. If, as some suggest, the empty tomb stories originated (either at Mark’s hand or before) as a derivation from the appearance traditions, then any conclusion drawn from them would ultimately be derivative of belief in the resurrection of Jesus. The independent lines of tradition-historical development, however, suggest otherwise: evidently the appearance traditions circulated independently of the disappearance traditions (as Paul’s silence on the empty tomb indicates), and only gradually, incrementally, were they combined in the literary work of the evangelists.⁶⁶ Thus, empty tomb talk or traditions need not presume, or even derive from, proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection, given the original separation and gradual combination of the appearance and disappearance traditions. Either way, the important thing is that Q 13:34–35 is evidence for another way of thinking and talking about the vindication of Jesus, one that—however it originated—need not presume resurrection as the underlying or “foundational” conviction.

Other Models of Post-Mortem Vindication

In response to Kloppenborg’s presentation of Q’s understanding of the vindication of Jesus, Hurtado tries to show that “the death-ascension schema of Q is neither incompatible with the other christological schemas nor unique to Q.” ⁶⁷

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⁶⁵. Not stated but implied (perhaps) by Kloppenborg, Excavating Q, 379 (on the resurrection); cf. ibid., 373–74 (on soteriological approaches to Jesus’ death); see Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 233, who makes the inference. Hurtado’s exegetical and historical judgment,” that “the authors of Q ... simply [wished] to emphasize that God would provide eschatological and postmortem vindication, and were less concerned to state explicitly the mode by which he would do so“ (Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 243) is based on his contention that Q’s vindication schema is not “radically different” from other christological schemas.

⁶⁶. See Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 840, 864. Differences among the resurrection stories are not just “traditional” differences but “literary” developments, and cannot simply be put down, as Wright does, to the “different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories,” stories which he views as traditions that have received “only minimal development, and most of that probably at the final editorial stage” (Wright, Resurrection, 611). See now Smith, Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter.

⁶⁷. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 237.
Hurtado notes other “christological schemas,” including those represented by 1 Thess 1:9–10 (“resurrection-assumption-return”), Rom 1:3–4 (“birth-resurrection”), Phil 2:6–11 (“humiliation-obedience-exaltation-acclamation”), and Hebrews (“death-assumption/exaltation”). Hurtado’s point is that since none of these is incompatible with a “death-resurrection” schema, neither therefore is the schema suggested by Q 13:34–35. He attempts to minimize the distinctiveness of Q in two ways. First, rhetorically: Hurtado uses the word “assumption” in his characterizations of 1 Thess 1:9–10, Phil 3:20–21, and Hebrews, though without adequate linguistic nor narrative support from the texts themselves. Second, theologically, Hurtado maintains that Q’s approach can be plotted reasonably within the (acceptable) range of diversity represented by various textual sources that do presume resurrection as the primary model of vindication. This second point is open to debate, as argued above. Ultimately, however, the question is not about “compatibility” or “uniqueness” but “difference.” Are not “Jesus was taken into heaven by God” and “Jesus was exalted in heaven by God” different claims (expressing different central and corollary ideas) than “Jesus was raised from the dead by God”? 

Yet Hurtado does raise the important question of how the significance of alternate language for the vindication of Jesus should properly be assessed. The presence in Q of an alternate model for conceptualizing Jesus’ post-mortem vindication opens up the possibility that other ways of talking about Jesus’ post-mortem significance are not merely synonymous with, or derivative of, the resurrection model. As Hurtado points out, some obvious examples can be found in early Christian traditional materials now embedded in the New Testament letters: neither the hymnic fragment in Phil 2:6–11, nor the formulaic piece in 1 Tim 3:16, refer to the resurrection of Jesus, though both speak of his exaltation and ongoing life in the divine realm. Similarly, Hebrews speaks about Jesus’ sacrificial death and continuing role as heavenly high priest, but resurrection language is entirely absent from the letter: exaltation or session language, not resurrection language, is typically connected with Jesus’ sacrifice for sins (e.g., 

68. Lord Jesus Christ, 236–37.

69. Lord Jesus Christ, 236–37. “Assumption” language and associated motifs are entirely absent from 1 Thess 1:9–10 and Phil 3:20–21; and assumption is implied only in Heb 13:20 (only if αναγω be taken as a lexical approximation of more frequently seen assumption language such as ἀναλαμβάνω etc.; for the lexical range see Lohfink, Himmelfahrt Jesu, 41–42, 73), which Hurtado is more inclined to take as presuming resurrection anyway (Lord Jesus Christ, 237).

70. The author of Luke-Acts, for instance, knew that “resurrection” and “assumption” were different motifs that each had their own distinctive corollaries. But the combination of resurrection and assumption in Luke-Acts indicates that the author did not think them either incompatible or synonymous with one another. On this see Smith, Post-Mortem Vindication, 86–87.
Heb 1:3; 10:10–14). Often those who presume “resurrection” as the original and originating schema of vindication simply state that resurrection is implied but not stated directly in such texts. Why state explicitly something everyone believed and took for granted?

But what if not everyone took it for granted? In the case of Phil 2:6–11, the post-mortem exaltation described need not presume the resurrection. A similar narrative arc in Wisdom 2–5 involves the “righteous one” being oppressed and wrongly put to death (2:10–21) but then standing exalted before his oppressors in a post-mortem judgment scene (5:1–14). Wisdom 2–5 does not employ the motif of resurrection, though in other texts resurrection language was found appropriate to describe the post-mortem vindication of martyrs (e.g., 2 Maccabees 7). The author of Wisdom used assumption language (probably influenced by Greek epitaphs or consolation literature) for the untimely and wrongful death of the “righteous one,” but in such a way that ideas typically associated with assumption in the Jewish tradition (exaltation, eschatological function) were also expressed. In comparison, Phil 2:6–11 is noticeably silent about the means whereby God highly exalts the one obedient to death. Does the hymn presume assumption or resurrection as the means of vindication? Does it presume exaltation like the “resurrection” of the Maccabean martyrs? Or was this silence meant to exploit the comparison the hymn draws between Jesus and the emperor as to authority (or apotheosis)? Work on the possible “backgrounds” of Phil 2:6–11 illustrates that there were many means available in the religious/cultural environments for expressing convictions such as the one found in Phil

71. As Hurtado notes (Lord Jesus Christ, 237), the lone candidate for resurrection language is the closing benediction (Heb 13:20–21) invoking “the God of peace, who led up from the dead (ὁ ἀναγαγὼν ἐκ νεκρῶν) the great shepherd of the sheep in the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord. . . .” H. W. Attridge (The Epistle to the Hebrews, 406) thinks standard resurrection language is being avoided here, given that Hebrews tends towards “language of exaltation not resurrection for the act whereby Jesus’ sacrifice is consummated and he himself ‘perfected.’”

72. For Phil 2:6–11, see (for example) G. D. Fee, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, 200; for 1 Tim 3:16, see W. D. Mounce, Pastoral Letters, 216–18; for Hebrews, see W. L. Lane, “Living a Life of Faith in the Face of Death,” 256–57, 262–68. Wright takes resurrection as implied in Phil 2:6–11, which he thinks was written by Paul (Resurrection, 227–28 and n. 45), in 1 Tim 3:16 (Resurrection, 270–71) and in Hebrews (Resurrection, 460–61).

73. So D. Georgi, “Der vorpaulinische Hymnus Phil 2, 6–11,” 263–93 (esp. 292): Georgi argued not only that the hymn implied assumption as the means of exaltation, but also that assumption was not a “supplement” to the idea of resurrection, but rather the “oldest christological tradition” (my translation). But there is no textual basis for this conclusion in Phil 2:6–11 (so Lohfink, Himmelfahrt Jesu, 85 n. 12; 97 n. 46).


75. See, for instance, David Seeley, “The Background of the Philippians Hymn (2:6–11).” Seeley cites (n. 18), among others, A. Deissmann (Light from the Ancient East, 349) and D. Georgi (Theocracy in Paul’s Praxis and Theology, 73). See also the discussion in P. Oakes, Philippians: From People to Letter, 147–74.
Is Jesus’ Post-Mortem Vindication Indispensable to Christian Origins?

There is a certain logic to Wright’s argument about dead messiahs. However, in order for the argument to work in relation to his overall thesis he has to assert that early Christians were uniformly messianic, and that the messianic ideas they held about Jesus were such that apart from the resurrection they cannot have been sustained. Both these supporting claims run into difficulties. Many would disagree with Wright that the messianic idea was central to the origins of Christianity (for the term christos is absent from the corpus of Jesus-traditions as well as from sources like Q and Thomas), while agreeing that some account must be given for how the title came to be applied to Jesus in the first place. The problem, as Merrill Miller has pointed out, is that the earliest sources that use the term christos—Paul’s letters—do not presuppose or argue that Jesus was “messianic,” but a few decades later Mark, Matthew, and Luke-Acts do. It has

2:8–9 (“he became obedient to the point of death . . . therefore God also highly exalted him”).

In sum, there is evidence in the early Christian texts that all three categories Dunn mentions—exaltation, assumption, and resurrection—were applied to Jesus, but not always in ways that suggest that belief in the resurrection of Jesus was the original (that is, originating) view and the others developments or aberrations from it. One can only claim that other categories of vindication are synonmys for resurrection by assuming that resurrection was the universal and original belief; that is, by assuming what one wants to prove (petitio principii). But by imagining early Christians as experimenting from the beginning with available language and ideas of vindication, we are better positioned to explain more completely how so many different christological assertions came to be made so early on—for not every such assertion (e.g., “Jesus was exalted to the role of eschatological judge”) can be explained straightforwardly as a development from the belief in Jesus’ resurrection.

76. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 866–70.

77. “It should also be observed that ‘resurrection’ is indeed core belief from the beginning. The ‘resurrection of Jesus’ is itself the beginning of belief in Jesus as exalted” (Jesus Remembered, 875, emphasis original).

78. Cf. Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 826.

79. See the concise survey in M. P. Miller, “The Problem of the Origins of a Messianic Conception of Jesus,” 301–35 (esp. 301–9). On the former point, Miller cites the results of the first Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins, published in The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity (J. H. Charlesworth, ed.). On the latter, Miller reviews four solutions that have been proposed: (1) Jesus thought of himself as Messiah but reinterpreted traditional notions; (2) the title indicates Jesus’ role as anointed prophet-sage, not a political messiah; (3) the title derives from Jesus’ execution as a messianic pretender; (4) on the basis of the resurrection Jesus came to be seen as the messiah-designate who would exercise his messianic role at his return (Miller, “Origins of a Messianic Conception,” 304–9).
thus traditionally been assumed that Paul’s use of the term \textit{christos} represents the logical end-point of the scenario depicted by Luke-Acts: that is, Paul’s use of \textit{christos} as the locus for Christian ideas must presume all the conceptual and exegetical work already done, on the basis of a Jewish consensus of what “messiah” was to be, in legitimating the application of the title to Jesus. It could then stand as a “given.” In Miller’s view, the differences between Paul and Luke-Acts “constitute a history of the use of the term \textit{christos} between roughly 50 and 100”—but it must be explained how it is that this history “is the opposite of what is usually assumed.”

A more basic issue implied by Wright’s dead messiah argument, however, is whether the idea of resurrection, or any of the possible alternatives discussed above, is indispensable to the beginnings of Christianity. Was the death of Jesus an insurmountable problem, apart from some strategy of divine post-mortem vindication, for communities that took him as their founder figure? The answer must be no, but it does depend on the dominant formulation of the significance of Jesus. For instance, it would require conceiving of no special vindicating act of God to continue to hold Jesus as a prophet, even an anointed one (as in 4Q521 and perhaps Q 7:22), after his death. All it would require is the affirmation that he came as an envoy of God and was rejected and murdered like so many other prophets. As Marinus de Jonge notes, “this model of interpretation . . . does not speak of Jesus’ resurrection as his vindication. [. . .] But the basic [deuteronomistic] pattern implies the vindication of Jesus, his followers, and all preceding messengers at the impending judgment on Israel.” It would require no special divine vindication of Jesus to think of him as a martyr: the category of martyr presumes the (noble, if wrongful) death of the individual, and besides inviting that the martyr’s pattern should be followed, could lead to “vicarious” ideas of the effect of the martyr’s death, but need not lead to more “elevated” claims. Nor would it require any special divine vindication of Jesus to continue to hold him as a sage whose sayings are revelatory. While Q associates the sayings of Jesus with Wisdom by virtue of his alliance or identification with her, the effect is not the vindication of the person of (the crucified) Jesus, but the legitimation of his sayings. Thomas is similar, if not in identifying Jesus with Sophia (for which, perhaps, see Thom 28, 90), at least in that it is the

81. For Q 7:22, 4Q521 and an anointed one more like Elijah than David, see Kloppenborg, \textit{Excavating Q}, 123. On the deuteronomistic motif of the murder of the prophets, see first of all O. H. Steck, \textit{Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten}.
82. M. de Jonge, \textit{God’s Final Envoy: Early Christology and Jesus’ Own View of His Mission}, 16–17. Using this pattern to explain the death of Jesus does require, however, that his execution by the Romans be understood as his rejection by Israel.
83. See D. Seeley, \textit{The Noble Death: Greco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation}.
sayings themselves (not Jesus their speaker) which are invested with authority and which require validation.85

Thus, strictly speaking, ideas involving God’s special intervention in the case of Jesus either to reverse his death or to effect his heavenly exaltation were apparently not essential to certain configurations of Jesus as an ideal figure or founder figure. For other configurations, however, such strategies are necessary: how could one validate the claim that Jesus was coming back as the eschatological Son of Man, unless one also affirmed that he had, like Enoch and Elijah, been taken away by God (or something along such lines)? But there were models for expressing the significance of Jesus without recourse to strategies of post-mortem vindication such as resurrection. To say this is not merely to insist that groups who affirmed the resurrection were also experimenting with other ways of handling the problem of Jesus’ death (such as the deuteronomistic motif of the persecution of prophets, or martyrlogical conceptions), although this might be what the present form of the canonical gospels would lead one to believe. Q requires that we think along other lines; and Thomas more so. As Ron Cameron has noted, “The notion of resurrection is absent from Thomas not because Thomas presupposes it as a central symbol or narratable experience, but because the metaphor of resurrection is fundamentally incompatible with the genre, designs, logic, and theology of this Gospel.”86 Thomas indicates there were also early Christian communities who could, and did, organize their behaviour and identity around the figure of Jesus entirely apart from such strategies.87

The Resurrection of Jesus as the Great Hermeneutical Shift

The followers of Jesus who affirmed his resurrection evidently found in it both the impetus for reconfiguring other received beliefs and a theological category of extraordinary elasticity. For both Paul and the traditions he inherited, the resurrection of Jesus was interpreted as the basis of various christological cognitions, as, for instance, in Rom 1:3–4, which claims that “the resurrection of the dead” had something to do with Jesus being “marked out” or “designated” (όρισθηντος) as “Son of God.” Exegetical details aside, the language here hints at christological cognition based upon claims about the activity of God (taking

85. See S. L. Davies, “The Christology and Protology of the Gospel of Thomas,” 674: “Jesus provides and validates the perspective on the world and on humanity advocated in Thomas, the presentation of which is Thomas’s primary intent.”
87. The problem with Thomas (as with Q) is still that its significance in relation to canonical texts is a matter of dispute. Compare, for instance, Cameron, “Thomas and Christian Origins,” 107–8 with Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 473.
the verb as a divine passive). And beyond this, the resurrection of Jesus was also considered by Paul fruitful ground for conceptual work with the basis of inclusion in the community (Rom 4:24–25), initiation and identity therein (Rom 6:1–11; Gal 2:19b–20), and eschatology (1 Corinthians 15), among other things. In instances such as these talk of a resurrection-based hermeneutical shift is entirely appropriate. However, the above remarks on the universality of resurrection belief, and on the necessity of divine vindication in general, can be applied as well to the premise that this kind of resurrection-based christological cognition was present in and fundamental to all early Christian groups. As Arland Hultgren put it, this is “the habit of measuring all forms of proclamation in light of the Pauline kerygma,” but more than that, it is taking the theological enterprise of Pauline Christianity (etc.) as the genesis of all Christianity.

This has not always been recognized, even for Jesus groups outside the orbit of kerygmatic Christianity. Heinz Tödt, for instance, could claim some forty years ago that Q represents the work of a “second sphere” of Christianity, alternative to that sphere which proclaimed the death-resurrection kerygma, but also that the community’s intent to re-proclaim Jesus’ own proclamation originated from their experience of Easter. Similarly, James Robinson in his 1981 SBL Presidential Address talked about “Easter” as an event that occasioned a shift in the christology of Q, and that Q evidenced an understanding of “the resurrected Christ as Spirit” which results in the validation of Jesus’ word in the present, although he also acknowledged that all this is not explicitly formulated by Q in resurrection terms. Responding to this were Burton Mack, who objected to Robinson’s assumption of what Mack called “the apocalyptic-kerygmatic hypothesis of Christian origins,” and John Kloppenburg, who argued

88. Wright’s contention that the resurrection provided the critical hermeneutical insight for early Christian reworking of “Messiah” is probably on its firmest ground here (see Wright, Resurrection, 242–45), though for an opposing view see Miller, “Origins of a Messianic Conception,” 331–34.


90. Thus the “worldview” conclusion of Wright in The Resurrection of the Son of God seems appropriate in relation to Pauline Christianity and the Christianities of the canonical gospels, though not nearly modest enough in relation to the whole of Christian origins. He writes: “The worldview questions [viz., Who are we? Where are we? What’s wrong? What’s the solution?], when posed to the early Christians, elicit a set of resurrection-shaped answers” (Resurrection, 581; emphasis original). To make such claims for all of Christian origins must involve putting Q and Thomas on the sidelines as aberrations from the authentic and unitary “Christian origin” in resurrection faith.

91. H. E. Tödt, The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition, 247, 268 (for the first point); 250–53 (for the second point).

92. J. M. Robinson, “Jesus—From Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles’ Creed),” 22–24; citation from 24. See more recently Robinson, “The Critical Edition of Q and the Study of Jesus,” 35: “the Q community, in its central mission of proclaiming the sayings of Jesus, was practicing their faith in his resurrection, even though resurrection language is not theirs, but ours.”

that Q’s “functional identification of Jesus and Sophia,” not his resurrection, was the basis of the legitimation of Jesus’ sayings in Q.  

Regardless of the applicability or inapplicability of the category “resurrection” to individual groups or texts within Christian origins, there is also a fundamental theoretical problem with the idea of a “hermeneutical shift.” To return for a moment to Wright’s analogy of the bridge: what is assumed in proposing that a bridge is necessary to explain religious innovation, let alone a river, or two well-defined, monolithic pillars? Does there need to be something like the resurrection of Jesus in order for religious innovation to occur? If we are justified in thinking of the early Jesus/Christ movements as variant forms of Judaism, how do scholars of religion account for the rise of variant forms of other ancient religions? Can formative or foundational impulses even be reliably isolated from the kerygma (or myths, or self-talk) of groups responsible for such innovations? Or is a better approach to think in terms of reaction to various social processes than reaction to a generative experience of illumination, an experience that scholars of religion can scarcely hope to isolate and study? These fundamental questions lead back to the work of those trying to redescribe Christian origins along the lines of “reflexive social experiments,” theoretical lines of inquiry this paper has deliberately set aside in order to address the question, “Did Christianity begin at the resurrection of Jesus?” on, as far as possible, common ground with those answering “Yes.”

Conclusion

The impact of early Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus, while not insignificant, can be overestimated historically and overextended theoretically in certain accounts of the beginnings of Christianity. Arguments such as those of Wright and Dunn inevitably run into difficulties in the counter-examples that have been discussed in this paper—but only if such counter-examples are taken seriously and not subsumed into a resurrection-based theory of Christian origins. This approach of taking alternative voices as aberrant from, or else in tacit agreement with, Christianities based on the passion-resurrection kerygma wrongly homogenizes Christian origins. For Paul and for others, the resurrection of Jesus did provide both a foundational insight and the raw material for conceptual innovation with basic issues important to the communities organized around the risen Jesus. (Yet even here one would not be justified in talking about the beginning of a “new” religion.) In some of the canonical writings after Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was not only rigorously defended but

stringently defined. Yet even therein it was fertile ground for theological work: witness, for instance, Luke’s anti-pneumatic approach to the resurrection body of Jesus (Luke 24:39) and its anthropological and soteriological interests. It must be remembered, however, that even though Luke’s “bodily” and “material” approach to resurrection became the dominant mode in “orthodox” Christianity, other ideas about resurrection were present at the beginning and persisted for a very long time. Working this ground continues to be important for understanding Christian origins, even if the resurrection cannot on its own explain the origin of “Christianity.”


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Acts—A Myth of Christian Origins

Joseph B. Tyson

The term “myth” has been around long enough in critical biblical scholarship that it should no longer cause consternation. Rudolf Bultmann gave it currency in the mid-twentieth century when he announced that “The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological.”1 Bultmann went on to specify what this actually meant:

The conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events; and the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits. This conception of the world we call mythological because it is different from the conception of the world which has been formed and developed by science since its inception in ancient Greece and which has been accepted by all modern men.2

The book of Acts certainly conforms to this definition. As a text from the ancient world, it speaks to us from this mythological context, and so we read of divine intervention in the choice of a successor apostle, of tongues of fire coming down and causing persons to speak clearly in languages that are foreign to them, of healings by means of a passing shadow, of death seemingly caused by speech, of an angelic release from prison, of voices from the sky, of scale-like substances falling from formerly blind eyes, of multiple visions with divine messages, of inexplicable survivals of shipwreck and snake bite, and on and on. The author of Acts naturally shares the world-view of his own time, which explains this-worldly events in terms of a world beyond.

While Bultmann’s discussion of mythology and his proposals for de-mythologizing are helpful to us in understanding Acts, as well as other early Christian writings, more recent discussions of myth have focused attention on other meanings and functions that may further illuminate the role that Acts

1. R. Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology, 15.
2. Bultmann, Jesus Christ, 15.
has played in the history of Christianity and the ways it has been interpreted in critical biblical scholarship. Indeed, the discussion of myth has become quite vigorous in the last several decades, and now definitions of it are complex, numerous, and diverse. Many students of myth stress the social function of traditional narratives in expressing, enhancing, and codifying belief, and in safeguarding and enforcing morality. Members of the SBL Seminar on Ancient Myth and Modern Theories of Christian Origins talk about the role of mythmaking in social construction, and they make use of this concept in their explorations of Acts. To be brief, we can speak of myths as charters for social organization and behavior.

In my judgment, the understanding of myth as charter illuminates the ways Acts has functioned in the history of Christianity. To be sure, the miraculous elements that Bultmann’s definition stressed have impressed generations of Christians. But the role of Acts in constructing a myth of Christian origins may best be seen in such things as its unitary characterization of the Jesus movement with headquarters in Jerusalem, its stress on unity and harmony in the earliest community, the authoritative role of twelve apostles, the easy settlement of disputes under the leadership of these apostles, the practice of sharing community goods, the fidelity of the early community to the Hebrew Scriptures and to Jewish rites and traditions, as well as its stress on Jewish opposition to the believing community. Readers of Acts learn that the Christian movement began in Jerusalem under the leadership of men appointed by Jesus, men who witnessed the resurrection and were commanded to remain in Jerusalem until they received the spirit. They also know that Paul allied himself solidly with the Jerusalem church and the apostles and that he engaged in missionary activity under their scrutiny. In all that the Christian leaders did they were guided by the divine, and everything they did was accomplished in an orderly fashion.

To be sure, it is not only in Acts that the value of order and acknowledged authority is expressed. 1 Clement, usually dated just before the end of the first century, appears to be a letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. There is no evidence that its author knew canonical Acts, but he nevertheless regarded the apostles as the authorized successors of Jesus. 1 Clement was probably written because there had been a struggle for leadership positions in Corinth, a struggle that resulted in the ouster of older leaders and the substitution of younger ones. The Roman church took the position that the challenge of duly constituted leaders was unchristian, and the letter of Clement was written to urge the Corinthians to re-instate the ousted leaders. The author of the letter

3. See, e.g., L. A. Northrup, “Myth-placed Priorities: Religion and the Study of Myth.” The article reviews no fewer than eight recent books on the meanings and functions of myth. See also Karen Armstrong, A Short History of Myth.
defended the older leaders by associating them with the apostles, about whom he wrote, “The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent from God. The Christ therefore is from God and the Apostles from the Christ. In both ways, then, they were in accordance with the appointed order of God’s will.” A little later in the same letter Clement wrote, “Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the title of bishop. For this cause, therefore, since they had received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have been already mentioned, and afterwards added the codicil that if they should fall asleep, other approved men (ἀνδρεὶς) should succeed to their ministry.” Thus, in a document that is probably independent of Acts, we find in nuce the doctrine of apostolic succession, the doctrine that the authorized leadership of the true Christian church consists of bishops who are able to trace their appointments back to the apostles and hence to Christ.

By the end of the second century the doctrine of apostolic succession was well developed, as we may see in the writings of Irenaeus, who certainly knew Acts. The bishop of Lyons was able to say, “The tradition of the apostles, made clear in all the world, can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles as bishops in the churches, and their successors down to our time, none of whom taught or thought of anything like their [the heretics’] mad ideas.” To support his case, Irenaeus includes an enumeration of the bishops of Rome from Linus to the contemporary, Eleutherus, “now in the twelfth place from the apostles.”

The letter of Clement and the writings of Irenaeus affirm the apostolic leadership of the early church, but it is the Acts of the Apostles that has served Christians as the myth of Christian origins. The power of the myth at a much later date may be seen in the thought of Puritan millenarians, who expected the restoration of the pristine church during the millennial era. The character

6. 1 Clem 42:1–2 (Lake, LCL).
7. 1 Clem 44:1–2 (Lake, LCL).
8. The relationship between Acts and 1 Clement is complicated by the current debate about the date of Acts. Among most contemporary scholars, Acts is dated about 85 CE and 1 Clement about 95 CE. Thus it would not be impossible for the author of 1 Clement to have known the book of Acts. But there is no explicit reference to it, although 1 Clement describes the apostles as preaching “from district to district, and from city to city” (1 Clem 42:4). A compelling case for dating Acts in the second century was made over sixty years ago by John Knox (Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon). Richard I. Pervo and I are currently proposing a date of c. 115–125 CE for the composition of Acts. See Pervo, Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists; Tyson, Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle.
10. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3, 3:3.
of Acts as charter defines modern Pentecostal churches, but it may also be discerned in countless sermons in which mainline preachers call on their congregations to adopt the model of unity that was in the early church and to adhere to apostolic orthodoxy. The “Damascus road experience” is not only a model of religious conversion; it has become a widely used metaphor for almost any change of conviction.

While we can appreciate the power of Acts as a myth of Christian origins, those of us who are interested in history are obligated to sort out its mythological and historical elements. This does not mean a simple distinction between what is false and what is true, since myth may embody truth at some level. Bultmann’s program of de-mythologization was intended to elucidate the truth contained in myth. “Its [de-mythologization’s] aim,” he wrote, “is not to eliminate the mythical statements but to interpret them.”12 Whether his program was successful or not, Bultmann was able to express certain mythological concepts in the NT in terms of existentialist thought and hence make the NT more accessible to many of his contemporaries.

For many scholars, however, Bultmann’s program is not sufficient. Some are as interested in history as in hermeneutics, and for over two hundred years historical critics have been probing the text of Acts and calling attention to its non-historical elements. Whatever else we may want to say about myth, we must say that myth and history are not the same things. Luther Martin makes this fact plain: “If the texts produced by early Christians are to be understood as the products of their mythmaking, they cannot then count as historiographically documentation in support of events portrayed in their production.”13 Gerd Lüdemann says it even more provocatively: “God or god should play no role in the historical investigation. The Acts of the Apostles must be investigated as all other religious or nonreligious texts are examined. And the rule that applies for historical science should also apply for theological science when it comes to the investigation of the historical records of Christianity.”14

It is startling, however, to realize that the myth of Acts continues to exercise great power even among modern critical scholars who are allegedly searching for history. The power of Acts as a charter myth has been hard to escape. The ways in which Acts has been used for historical reconstruction may be seen most clearly in three areas of research: Christian origins, Pauline biography, and Pauline chronology.15

15. In what follows, I do not intend to present a survey that is close to being exhaustive. The survey is, however, representative of typical approaches to the chosen topics. I also cite mostly the more recent such studies, on the assumption that the older ones are better known.
CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Some studies of Christian origins are, for the most part, relatively uncritical replications of Acts. Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, for example, regret that Acts “covers only part of the history of primitive Christianity,”16 but still regard it as of indisputable historical value. On Pentecost, they comment: “It is as impossible to write the history of the Church without starting from the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in the year 30, as to write the history of Christ without starting from the incarnation of the Word on the day of the Annunciation.”17 Lest a reader think that this is only a way of speaking of the source material, they later comment that the evidence of Acts shows “the creation of the Church as an event in sacred history and there is no reason to doubt this evidence.”18 W. H. C. Frend is similar.19 He accepts the structure of Acts as basic to his own historical construction. Although he suspects that things might have been more complex than Luke allowed, he nevertheless accepts as historical the leadership of the Jerusalem church and the apostles, and he traces the development of the Christian movement through the Hellenists and Stephen. On the differences between Acts 15 and Galatians 2, he simply notes that Paul’s version is “more abrasive.”20

Other scholars have more carefully nuanced their judgments. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn is aware of some skeptical criticism of Acts but puts himself in the role of an apologist for its author: “It is often asserted that the evidence of the Book of Acts is of secondary value and to some extent this assessment is correct. Yet even if it is of lesser value, that does not mean that it is worthless, and the use of its evidence is not, in my opinion, to be treated with the extreme skepticism which one sometimes encounters, as if its account could never be correct.”21 He suggests that Acts cannot be neglected in the study of Christian origins. “Instead its information must be weighed carefully, item by item, in order to determine whether credible tradition is present or not, making all due allowance both for the distance which probably separates its author from the events described and for the perspective of a later period which his work reveals.”22 But Wedderburn is not explicit in telling readers how to weigh the information in Acts, and his own efforts to do so tend to assume, if not to reinforce, the historical value of Acts. The structure of his book replicates that of Acts, and his questioning of the material rarely considers the Lukan agenda. On the preaching of Stephen in Acts 7, for example, Wedderburn notes a number of historical problems and questions whether Luke may have spun the story in

16. J. Daniélou and H. Marrou, The First Six Hundred Years, 3.
17. Daniélou, First Six Hundred, 4.
18. Daniélou, First Six Hundred, 4.
some way. But he does not pursue this question and offers as a solution, not a suggestion about the nature of Luke’s spinning, but about the probable history reflected in his story. That is to say, in Wedderburn’s treatment, Stephen and the Hellenists are assumed to be historical—as distinguished from literary—characters and so subject to direct historical analysis. Thus he offers the following hypothesis:

Stephen’s offence lay in anticipating already, at least to some extent, Paul’s attitude towards the observance of the law, particularly as it concerned relations with non-Jews. Stephen, and probably others too, showed already some of that openness towards the gentiles which was later to characterize the Pauline mission, an openness which involved a relaxation of those commandments of the law which regulated contact with non-Jews and safeguarded the purity and integrity of God’s chosen people.23

The hypothesis is a typical one in scholarship on Acts and Christian origins. Dom Crossan’s Birth of Christianity is in many ways a corrective to those studies of early Christianity that tend to perpetuate the myth of Acts.24 At the very beginning, he questions the historical value of Acts:

Do we not have precious information in what we call the Acts of the Apostles about those lost years of the 30s and 40s? We do indeed, but with several difficulties. First, it is hard, without independent vectors, to separate history from theology and tradition from redaction in that writing. Second, Luke gives us a very general picture. . . . Third, you would know from that text about Christianity in Jerusalem, but you would know nothing about Christianity in Galilee.25

In fact, Acts plays little role in Crossan’s analysis. Although he has a good deal of material on the Jerusalem community, his description of it tends to illuminate the text of Acts rather than vice versa. He treats it as a “community of resistance,” and, drawing from Paul’s letters rather than Acts, Crossan puts a great deal of weight on Paul’s collection for the Jerusalem poor. He writes, “Luke certainly knows traditions about the collection, but he either does not know what he has or he does not want to admit what he knows. He does not have a single explicit word about the collection, but he has several crucial references that can apply only to it.”26 He lists the relevant texts from Acts but cautions “that Luke makes sense only if you know what is happening from Paul.”27 Behind this is a methodological principle that will emerge more clearly in the sections that follow on the biography and chronology of Paul. In any event, it may be said that Crossan has here broken loose from the power of Acts as a charter myth by

25. Crossan, Birth, x.
27. Crossan, Birth, 474.
framing his own narrative without respect to its structure and using it critically and selectively. On the other hand, it should also be observed that Crossan's agenda does not allow him to indulge in careful consideration of Luke's own context and possible motives.28

In a recent study, Daniel Marguerat referred to the author of Acts as the "First Christian Historian."29 This traditional title may, however, be misleading, because Marguerat is careful to stress that Luke was an uncritical historian. He does not use the term, myth, to describe Acts, but his designation of it as "historiography with an apologetic aim" and "a narrative of beginnings," suggests that he would be hospitable to the term. "Neither a novel, biography or hagiography, nor an apology in the strict sense, the book of Acts cannot be locked into any of these categories. However, it must be acknowledged that it shares many characteristics with such literary genres. The closest categorization is a historiography with an apologetic aim, which permits Christianity both to understand and to speak itself. Its status as a narrative of beginnings assures the Lucan work a clear identity function.”30

Members of the SBL Seminar on Ancient Myth and Modern Theories of Christian Origins, to whom we referred above, have adopted an intentional position that sharply distinguishes myth and history in an effort to re-imagine aspects of the early Jesus movement.31 Clearly, the Westar Institute's seminar on Christian origins will need to work with the publications of this group in mind as it proceeds. It is not surprising that the membership of the two groups overlaps to a significant extent.32 The clear recognition of the mythological aspects of Acts has liberated members of the SBL seminar as it has members of Westar’s Acts Seminar. The essay by Dennis Smith is especially important in exploding many assumptions, based on Acts, about the singular importance of the Jerusalem church.33

**PAULINE BIOGRAPHY**

If the mythic power of Acts is impressive in many scholarly studies of the early Christian movement, its seeming inescapability becomes manifest in studies of the life of Paul. The place to start is with the important methodological work

31. See Cameron, *Redescribing.*
32. See the essays by Willi Braun, Ron Cameron, Arthur J. Dewey, and Dennis E. Smith, in Cameron, *Redescribing.* It should also be noted that Hal Taussig was a member of the steering committee of the SBL seminar.
of John Knox, originally published in 1950 and revised in 1987.\textsuperscript{34} This is a work that has been influential even among those who sometimes violate its principles.

In his discussion of the sources for Paul, Knox acknowledges that, whereas the letters are incomparable as sources for his thought, the information we may obtain from them about the external aspects of his life is minimal and sketchy. Nevertheless, Knox maintains that both for the internal and external aspects of Paul’s life, the letters “are obviously and incomparably the more trustworthy.”\textsuperscript{35} Then he adds: “The truth in principle of this last statement no serious student of Paul’s life is likely to deny, but its meaning in practice is not so widely or so clearly seen.”\textsuperscript{36} What he means by this is that “while we tend to harmonize Acts with the letters as regards the inner facts of Paul’s life, we tend to harmonize the letters with Acts as regards the outer. Neither instance of harmonization, of course, can be justified; but whereas the first is relatively innocuous, since the letters are given their true importance in the process, the second is seriously distorting.”\textsuperscript{37} And he adds: “The distinction between primary and secondary sources in this case is of such importance that we can justly say that a fact only suggested in the letters has a status which even the most unequivocal statement of Acts, if not otherwise supported, cannot confer. We may, with proper caution, use Acts to supplement the autobiographical data of the letters, but never to correct them.”\textsuperscript{38} Knox then contrasts the biographical and chronological information about Paul in Acts with that in the letters and attempts to provide a sketch of Paul’s life drawn entirely from the letters. Major differences from the Acts portrayal are to be found in the number of visits that Paul made to Jerusalem, as well as in the relative chronology of the visits and the intervening activity. For example, Knox is convinced that most of Paul’s evangelistic activity took place before his visit to Jerusalem that he described in Gal 2:1–10 and that the outcome of his meeting on this occasion was, as Paul testifies, his commitment to raise funds for the poor in Jerusalem. Further, the short time between this visit and Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem was consumed with the collecting of these funds, and the purpose of his last visit was to deliver the funds as a symbol of the unity of his mission with that in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, Knox is convinced that Luke’s concern with church unity, his need to connect Paul with the Jerusalem apostles, and his stress on the close ties of the Christian movement with the Scriptures and Jewish faith led him to structure Paul’s movements in terms of visits to Jerusalem and to bring him to the city as frequently as possible.

\textsuperscript{34} See J. Knox, \textit{Chapters in a Life of Paul}. References below are to the revised edition.
\textsuperscript{35} Knox, \textit{Chapters}, 18.
\textsuperscript{36} Knox, \textit{Chapters}, 18.
\textsuperscript{37} Knox, \textit{Chapters}, 19.
\textsuperscript{38} Knox, \textit{Chapters}, 19.
\textsuperscript{39} The issue of Pauline chronology will be treated further in the following section, below.
Methodologically what is at stake here is the fundamental distinction between primary and secondary sources and how they should be used. Knox calls for us to begin with the primary sources and to supplement them with material from secondary sources only when their evidence may be critically verified. Neither privileging Acts nor harmonizing the two sources is appropriate. As John Hurd observed, after acknowledging the extent of agreement between Paul and Acts, “no amount of cataloguing of parallels will convert the secondary source into a primary witness.”

It is striking, however, to observe how little this fundamental distinction has been observed even in critical scholarship. Some fifty-five years after the original publication of Knox’s book, Hurd wrote, “A new era in the study of Paul’s life began with the publication of John Knox’s modest volume, Chapters in a Life of Paul, in 1950.” But he correctly added, “Knox’s observation that the ‘meaning in practice’ of the logical distinction between the letters and Acts was ‘not so widely or so clearly seen’ can be applied to subsequent Pauline studies as well as those that Knox had in mind. The temptation to harmonize Acts and the letters is so overwhelming that I can think of no treatment of Paul’s life that confines itself solely to the letters.”

A glance at some recent studies bears out Hurd’s contention. Martin Hengel stands at what must be called the opposite pole from Knox. In most of his work he has proceeded with little acknowledgement of Knox’s contribution, but misses no opportunity to cast aspersions on what he regards as “radical criticism.” He regards Acts as a trustworthy source for material about Paul:

For all his tendentious distortions, Luke’s contribution to the historical understanding of Paul is essentially greater than many scholars want to suppose today. Paul’s origins in Tarsus, his link with Jerusalem, the significance of Antioch and of Barnabas for the early Paul, the sequence of Paul’s letters, the length of his stay in missionary centres and the chronology of his activity—all these and much else would be completely or largely unknown to us without Acts.

In his Pre-Christian Paul, Hengel accepts much information that appears only in Acts: that Paul was a Roman citizen; that he studied with Gamaliel; that he persecuted the Hellenist believers in Jerusalem; that he traveled to Damascus to persecute believers there; and that he was converted on the road to Damascus. In a later study, written with Anna Maria Schwemer, Hengel virtually discards Knox’s distinction between primary and secondary sources:

42. Hurd, “Reflections,” 131–32.
44. Hengel, The Pre-Christian Paul.
Contrary to a widespread anti-Lukan scholasticism which is often relatively ignorant of ancient historiography, I regard Acts as a work that was composed soon after the Third Gospel by Luke ‘the beloved physician’ (Col. 4:14), who accompanied Paul on his travels from the journey with the collection to Jerusalem onwards. In other words, as at least in part an eye-witness account for the late period of the apostle, about which we no longer have any information from the letters, it is a first-hand source.45

To be fair, Hengel and Schwemer are not oblivious to problems in Acts, and they recognize Luke’s theological tendencies, exaggerations, and, at least on one occasion, carelessness. For example, they observe that in Jerusalem Paul finds “disciples” in Acts 15 even after all of them had been driven out according to Acts 8:1, and they write, “This is one of Luke’s pieces of carelessness or exaggerations [sic].”46 They regard the scene of Paul’s appearing before the apostles as unhistorical, but they seem more than ready to accept much unconfirmed material from Acts, for example that Agabus warned of a famine and that Paul had a helpful nephew in Jerusalem.

Ben Witherington takes a position similar to that of Hengel and attempts to make a virtue out of a necessity: “Since Paul himself provides few autobiographical remarks in the undisputed letters, we can hardly do without some help from Acts in any case. Because the Pauline letters are not by and large autobiographical in subject matter, it is a mistake to consider them an overwhelmingly more primary source for reconstructing a picture of the historical Paul than Acts.”47 It is notable that Witherington neither includes Knox’s work in his bibliography nor, according to the index, refers to him elsewhere. Luke Timothy Johnson makes substantially the same point: “When Paul’s movements in Acts are compared to those reported in his letters, furthermore, it appears that despite his selection and shaping of materials, Luke provides a reliable if partial framework for reconstructing that portion of Paul’s career. Indeed, Acts is indispensable for any attempt at such reconstruction. Where we can check him on details, Luke’s factual accuracy in the latter part of Acts is impressive.”48

Stanley Porter makes a significant contribution in his study, The Paul of Acts, where he devotes serious attention to the differences between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters.49 But in the end he regards the differences as relatively insignificant and, for the most part, attributable to the use of different literary genres:

There are admittedly some differences between the two authors . . . , but I would contend that these are merely the kinds of differences that one could expect to find

46. Hengel and Schwemer, Paul Between Damascus, 137.
between virtually any two different yet accomplished authors when writing about the same events. The possibility of differences would be made more acute by the use of the different genres—narrative versus letter—and their clearly different literary purposes—that of telling the story of early Christianity and that of addressing problems in a local church congregation. At the least, after weighing the arguments as carefully as possible, there does not seem at this point to be any significant argument that would indicate otherwise.\(^{50}\)

One implication we could draw from Porter’s work is that, in the case of Paul and Acts, there is no significant difference between primary and secondary sources.

An important recent article by Richard Bauckham deserves careful consideration.\(^{51}\) Bauckham focuses his attention on the so-called apostolic conference in Acts 15 but prefaces it with a helpful study of the meaning of Gentile impurity in second-temple Judaism. He maintains that Gentiles were regarded as morally impure, that is, guilty of sexual sins, murder, and idolatry. But they could not strictly be ritually impure, since they were not included in the biblical regulations. Bauckham says further that, in the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18), Peter became convinced that Gentiles could become morally pure by renouncing idolatry, murder, and sexual sins. He expressed this same conviction in Acts 15, at which the four apostolic prohibitions were issued. Bauckham concludes, “The four prohibitions in the apostolic decree (Acts 15:29) correspond to the four things that are prohibited to ‘the alien who sojourns in your/their midst’ in Leviticus 17–18 . . . .”\(^{52}\) And,

In other words, the offences which are prohibited in Leviticus 17–18 and in the apostolic decree are those which were most often regarded as constituting the moral impurity of Gentiles. The fit with the situation in Acts 15 is perfect. If God has indeed, as Peter claims, “purified their [the Gentiles’] hearts by faith” these are the impurities—the typical Gentile sins—from which they are henceforth to be pure. The apostolic decree does not really add to Peter’s position on the matter. It simply spells out a necessary implication of Peter’s view: that Gentile members of the messianic people of God are to refrain from the moral impurities in which Gentiles typically indulged.\(^{53}\)

If, therefore, Gentile believers may no longer be regarded as morally impure, there are no barriers to their eating together with Jewish believers, and Paul could have accepted the prohibitions, even if reluctantly.

Bauckham admits that his approach may be faulted methodologically. He writes, “Although it might be considered methodologically suspect to move from Acts to a Pauline letter, this procedure has the advantage of a fresh angle

\(^{50}\) Porter, \emph{Paul}, 206.
\(^{51}\) See R. Bauckham, “James, Peter, and the Gentiles.”
\(^{52}\) Bauckham, “James, Peter,” 119.
\(^{53}\) Bauckham, “James, Peter,” 120.
from which to approach the much debated material in Galatians 2, especially the question of what is actually the issue between Paul, Peter, and the ‘certain persons from James’ in the altercation at Antioch.’ Part of the “fresh approach” involves a different way of harmonizing Acts and Galatians. Bauckham identifies Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1–10) with the famine relief visit of Acts 11:29–30. The Antioch incident (Gal 2:11–21) is the event that precipitated the conference of Acts 15:1–29. The agreement reached at the famine relief visit, says Bauckham, was transient and soon broke down and was superseded by that in Acts 15. The point to be emphasized here is that Bauckham goes to extraordinary lengths to privilege the Acts narrative historically, even requiring evidence from Paul’s letters to be fit into that of Acts. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the power of the Christian charter myth has played a major role here, so that Bauckham intentionally reverses primary and secondary materials.

I maintained above that Dom Crossan’s study of early Christianity broke new ground in regard to the use of Acts. Similarly, his more recent work, with Jonathan L. Reed, provides us with a study of Paul that is not dependent on Acts. Early in their book, Crossan and Reed lead readers to an understanding of the relevance of Acts. They acknowledge that Luke had sources about Paul but observe that he “seems to care very little about the purposes, intentions, and meanings that Paul himself emphasizes in his own letters.” Thus, “in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul becomes a Christian not of his own time and place, but of Luke’s.” The authors then illustrate this point by discussing Luke’s stress on Pauline subordination to the Jerusalem apostles, on pagan greed and Jewish jealousy as explanations of their opposition to Paul, and the friendly reactions of Roman authorities to Paul.

One might initially suspect that Crossan and Reed have succumbed to the Acts myth in their contention that Paul focused his Gentile mission chiefly on God-fearers. As is generally recognized, God-fearers are important in Acts but never mentioned in the letters of Paul. Crossan and Reed, however, find support for the existence of God-fearers not only in the well-known Aphrodias inscription, but also in comments of Philo and Josephus, and they maintain that it is only those Gentiles who had formerly been associated with synagogues who could have understood Paul’s letters.

Gerd Lüdemann’s study of Acts has been mentioned above, and it is appropriate to return to it at this point. Although some of his contentions about the historical validity of individual narratives rest on unexplained assumptions,

54. Bauckham, “James, Peter,” 121.
55. See Crossan and J. Reed, In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom.
56. Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 28.
57. Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 28.
58. See Crossan and Reed, In Search of Paul, 34–41.
59. See Lüdemann, Acts.
his work signals an important break with previous scholarship on Acts.\textsuperscript{60} He doggedly pursues questions of historicity and consistently maintains the distinction between primary and secondary sources. At the end of his recent book, Lüdemann tells readers where Luke was right, where he was wrong, and what is missing in Acts. He states the result of his study as follows: “By interweaving history and legend, Luke confused facts, fiction, and faith. He blended historical and suprahistorical fact, thereby falsifying history for the sake of piety, politics, and power. This was clearly an offense against the rules of critical historiography even in his day.”\textsuperscript{61} In other words, Lüdemann has recognized and exposed the non-historical aspects of the Acts myth.\textsuperscript{62}

**PAULINE CHRONOLOGY**

Chronology cannot be neatly separated from biography, and some aspects of Pauline chronology have been mentioned above. Here, however, I would like to focus attention on what is usually called absolute chronology. Knox himself observed the distinction between relative and absolute chronology, first placing the various events alluded to in Paul’s letters in a relative sequence and then attempting to nail down the events in terms of specific dates. He acknowledged that we have little to go on at this point. Only in 2 Cor 11:32–33, where Paul tells of an escape from Aretas in Damascus, do we find help from Paul’s letters. This event would have occurred prior to 40 CE, the last date of Aretas’ reign.

There are, however, four other dates that have been used in developing Pauline chronologies, and all four depend solely on the narrative of Acts.

(1) The first date relates to the visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem reported in Acts 11:28–30. This is the so-called relief visit precipitated by a famine that, according to Acts, occurred during the reign of Claudius, an event that is usually dated in 46 CE. The incident and date are important in the chronology constructed by Charles Buck and Greer Taylor, where it becomes central in the entire Pauline chronology.\textsuperscript{63}

(2) Acts 18:2 tells of Paul’s meeting with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth and explains that they were there due to the recent edict of Claudius ordering all Jews to leave Rome, an event that Knox dates in 41 CE. Although he makes no real use of this evidence, Knox notes that it actually supports his own Pauline chronology, based on the Pauline letters, according to which Paul first arrived in Corinth in 43 CE.


\textsuperscript{61} Lüdemann, *Acts*, 363.


(3) The third date depends on the narrative in Acts about Paul’s appearance before the proconsul of Achaia, Gallio (Acts 18:12–17). An inscription from Delphi shows that Gallio was in Corinth as proconsul in 52 CE. Knox concedes that this date makes trouble for his Pauline chronology, but he resolves it by noting that Paul paid two trips to Corinth, the second of which was in 53, and that Luke may have mistakenly located the Gallio incident during the first rather than the second visit.

(4) In Acts 24:27, Luke notes that Paul had been in prison for two years when Porcius Festus arrived in Jerusalem to succeed Felix as procurator. Knox accepts the date, 55 CE, as that of Festus’ arrival, and for him it becomes a lynchpin for determining the course of Pauline chronology. Knox writes,

As to the date of the final visit to Jerusalem which marked the end of Paul’s active career, we must depend only upon the Acts statement that this visit occurred some two years before Festus succeeded Felix as procurator of Judea. Although there is no corroborative evidence for this statement in the letters, there is no contradictory evidence, and there seems to be no adequate reason for distrusting it. . . . If Paul’s arrest did not occur somewhere in the neighborhood of the time when this change of administration took place, Luke-Acts is involved in an error which on any view of the date, authorship, or purpose of that work is almost incredible.64

Although Knox at this point found the Acts account to be trustworthy, it should be noted that he did so only after extracting as much relevant information from the letters as he possibly could. Further, although his treatment is brief, he lets us know something of his methodological principles: Acts is trustworthy at this point since it does not contradict anything in Paul’s letters. Knox appears to be unusually traditional in accepting this date, and his judgment about the author of Acts is surprising and, in my opinion, unconvincing.

It is not my purpose here to engage in a discussion of the accuracy of these dates or their bearing on Pauline chronology, but only to illustrate the ways in which our charter myth has influenced scholarship. It bears repeating that the relevance for Pauline chronology of all four dates noted above depends solely on the book of Acts.

A striking example of the power of the Acts chronology may be seen in a recent study of Paul by Udo Schnelle.65 Schnelle begins with a sophisticated analysis of historiography and methodology. On the latter, his comments seem to be very much in line with those of Knox.

In terms of method, the historian’s point of departure is the self-evident principle that primary sources always receive priority. We should thus always prefer the chronological data that one can glean from the undisputed Pauline letters when

64. Knox, Chapters, 46.
65. See Udo Schnelle, Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology.
they are in tension or contradiction to other New Testament reports. We are not thereby disparaging the historical value of Acts, but when Acts and the undisputed Pauline letters contradict each other, we should follow the letters. On the other hand, when the information from Acts and Paul’s letters can be combined, we obtain a solid basis for Pauline chronology. When Acts is the only source for events from the life of Paul, then one must probe the extent to which Luke transmits reliable older tradition or whether his presentation derives from his own redactional composition.66

But almost immediately Schnelle draws on two incidents that appear only in Acts and uses them to form the fundamental basis for Pauline chronology: the edict of Claudius and the Gallio inscription.

Schnelle accepts the date 49 CE, rather than 41, for the edict of Claudius, explaining that the date was determined by the fifth-century Christian historian Orosius.67 He dates the time of Gallio in Achaia as “from the early summer of 51 to the early summer of 52.”68 “Assuming that the Jews would have brought complaints against Paul soon after the new proconsul entered office, we can date the Gallio scene of Acts 18:12–16 to the summer of 51.”69 In a note, Schnelle adds, “This date is the only item in recent discussions of Pauline chronology on which there is general consensus.”70

What is remarkable about Schnelle’s study is the contrast between his announced principle of interpretation and his practice, at least in the effort to determine absolute chronology. If you are going to accept something that appears in Acts alone, says Schnelle, you “must probe the extent to which Luke transmits reliable older tradition or whether his presentation derives from his own redactional composition.”71 But no genuine probing is included. Although these dates play little role in the rest of Schnelle’s book, they nevertheless enable him to construct a chronology which depends on them.72

67. Schnelle does not disclose the fact that Orosius determined this date by using Acts. Lüdemann explains that Orosius “derived it by subtracting the eighteen months found in verse 11 [Acts 18:11] from the dates of Gallio’s term in office—which could be determined from archival records,” and he rightly regards it as secondary. See Lüdemann, Acts, 236. Lüdemann accepts the reference to the edict of Claudius, which he dates in 41 CE, following Dio Cassius and Suetonius, as establishing the time when Paul was in Corinth. But it should be noted that he does so because it fits the relative chronology derived exclusively from the Pauline letters.
68. Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 49.
69. Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 49.
70. Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 49 n. 9. Note that Lüdemann, Acts, 239–40, also accepts the Gallio reference but only as a designation of the time that Paul was in Corinth; he denies the historicity of the incident before Gallio. Actually Schnelle accepts a third date from Acts, that of Festus’s arrival in Jerusalem, based on Acts 24:27.
CONCLUSION

Finally, I want to initiate a discussion of what it might mean for historical scholarship if we not only recognize Acts as a myth of Christian origins but begin to treat it as such. I emphasize that I am asking about historical scholarship, which will certainly guide the deliberations of Westar’s Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins. A myth is exceedingly important in influencing ways in which a people thinks of itself, in elevating values, and exploring ultimacy. Further, it would be rash to assume that a myth is totally without historical linkages. So I ask how Acts might be used, if at all, in exploring Christian origins.

There are no easy answers to this question, but, in my judgment, it is important to begin with a firm understanding of the context of the composition of Acts and the probable intention of its author. Members of Westar’s Acts Seminar and others have helpfully sorted out some of the redactional aspects of Acts, many of which emerge from themes that the author stresses throughout the narrative. The concept of the Jerusalem church as apostolic headquarters, the harmony among the early Christians, and the portrait of Paul as a loyal Pharisaic Jew who adheres to Torah and all Jewish traditions and raises no significant questions about the validity of Jewish law—these themes come readily to mind. If our general consensus in the Acts Seminar about a second-century date of Acts is considered probable and if my own contention about Acts as an anti-Marcionite text is plausible, we have come a long way toward understanding the context of Acts and the meaning of many of its themes.73 For example, the characterization of Paul as a Pharisaic Jew may be intended to counter Marcionite claims that Paul separated himself totally from Jewish beliefs and practices. The emphasis in Acts on harmony among the early Christians is not simply a product of Lukian idealization, but a reaction against Marcionite and other contentions of conflict among the early leaders. Lukian narratives that stress the importance of Jerusalem and the temple as the venues of early Christian activity may be intended to cement a link with Jewish institutions that Marcionites and others totally denied.

In addition, it is important to stress the distinction between primary and secondary sources. Of course, for much of the Acts narrative, there are no primary sources, and this has led many scholars to despair. We may finally have to concede that our sources do not permit the construction of anything more than a fragmentary impression of the pre-Pauline church, and if this is the case we must simply be honest with our publics. For Pauline Christianity, however, we have a primary source of incomparable value. Of course, the letters of Paul do not tell the whole story, they often tell it with a passionate bias, and they contribute to the mythmaking enterprises of the early believers. But Knox’s insistence that it is the only primary source for the period in question must be given its due. Acts cannot be used as the basis for an understanding of Paul, nor can

Pauline contentions be corrected by material in Acts. We must be very suspi-
cious of those notes that appear only in Acts, without corroboration elsewhere.  
Only where a credible case can be made for the existence of reliable underlying 
tradition that was used and perhaps modified in Acts, can we talk about the 
historical value of this important text for the study of first-century Christianity. 

If we are right about the date and context of Acts, we may begin to appreciate 
its myth as one that was required to compete with others. The Marcionites, for 
example, no less than the proto-orthodox, created a myth of origins, and, in my 
judgment, the Acts myth was composed to compete with it and perhaps with 
others. But as a historical source, I think we must reluctantly conclude that Acts 
is much more valuable for second-century Christianity than for first.

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Did Christianity Begin at Pentecost?

REFLECTIONS ON THE QUESTION*

Shelly Matthews

I have been invited to address the question, “Did Christianity begin at Pentecost?” In formulating an answer, I am immediately reminded that to pose a question about origins is to pose a question about identity. I do not mean in any principle way the identity of those with the flaming tongues upon their heads in Acts 2, or the identity of those who first inscribed the flaming tongues in their stories, but rather the identity of those who ask such questions. In my own work, I presume the basic feminist argument, shared with other liberationist, as well as post-modern perspectives, that quests for origins are not a branch of some objective science, but rather are deeply embedded in contemporary power relations that are both discursive and non-discursive—and include the institutional fields, the political and economic commitments, and the material resources of those who write such histories. That is, as many of us have come to realize, histories of origins are never merely a matter of writing “histories of” but always, also, of writing “histories for.” We make choices about how to describe where we came from, and those choices are contingent upon our present day interests, values, and concerns.

The initial question for me, then, is this: Who benefits from the answers arrived at through the deliberations of the Westar Institute; to what end do we

*I thank Dennis Smith for issuing the invitation to address this question in the Fall 2006 meeting of the Westar Institute. Many of my arguments here receive further development in my book, Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity.

1. On these arguments as they apply to studies in the field of New Testament and late antiquity, see Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, “Re-visioning Christian Origins: In Memory of Her Revisited”; Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig, “Drawing Large and Starling Figures: Reimagining Christian Origins by Painting Like Picasso”; and Elizabeth Clark, History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn; see also the entry on “historiography” by Fred W. Burnett in Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation.

On the ideology of historical narrative in general, see Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation and Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History.

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write this history; what is at stake for us as we attempt to reach consensus concerning the nature of Christian origins? In seeking answers to this question for myself, I note with considerable appreciation that Westar’s explicit aim is that the public benefit; a key and laudable concern of the Institute is to disseminate biblical scholarship beyond the walls of the academy in order to increase biblical literacy. However, from my recent forays into previously published Forum essays on Acts, as well as in the collection of essays on Acts gathered by the Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins Seminar, a group whose membership overlaps considerably with Westar’s, I see also further aims and interests which are problematic for me. Almost to a man (and, as you may have noticed, there is no need to grasp for a gender inclusive term here), the desire is expressed in this recent Acts scholarship that modern constructors of Christian origins avoid the trap of reinscribing the mythic and apologetically driven narrative of origins laid out in Acts. This desire is often accompanied by acknowledgment that this trap has jaws of steel, virtually impossible to unhinge. As Joseph Tyson states the problem “It is startling . . . to realize that the myth of Acts continues to exercise great power even among modern critical scholars who are allegedly searching for history . . . the power of Acts as a charter myth has been hard to escape.” I also affirm this historiographical concern to avoid reinscribing Acts’ version of origins. But I want to push us further so that we ask more specifically which aspects of the Lukan version of history we want to avoid reinscribing. There seems general consensus, for instance, that it is best to question Luke’s inscription of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem apostles as the authorizing center of early Christianity, as well as the linear progression of Christianity from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth. However, it appears to me that there is little concern to avoid reinscribing Acts’ kyriocentric framework. This aspect of Acts is reinscribed and reauthorized quite frequently in recent deliberations.

2. J. B. Tyson, “Acts: A Myth of Christian Origins.” Further iterations: Dennis Smith, “It is difficult to avoid the influence of Acts on our historical imagining of Christian origins; it is the elephant in the room of our historical discourse” (from “Acts and Christian Origins,” a paper for the Spring 2006 meeting of the Acts Seminar in Miami); Merrill P. Miller, on issues of Paul’s relationship to the Jerusalem pillars, “we are trapped in the myth of origins we wish to explain” (p. 235 of “Antioch, Paul and Jerusalem: Diaspora Myths of Origins in the Homeland”); Burton Mack, on imagining a Jerusalem group with some connection to the Jesus movement: “The challenge is great because such an imagination will have to be achieved without appeal to the Lukan or Christ-cult models and with very little hard evidence. The temptation will be to suggest that, since there is not enough evidence to construct scenarios other than the traditional Lukan portrayals, must we not allow this or that feature of the regnant model to remain in play, at least as a possibility?” (p. 254 of “A Jewish Jesus School in Jerusalem?”).

3. Kyriocentrism- Kyriarchy: neologisms introduced in the theoretical works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza over the past decade to signal that systems of domination are not merely “patriarchal,” ruled by fathers,” but “kyriarchal,” ruled by lords/masters. That is, social power relationships are not simply accounted for by the gender binary of man over woman, but require acknowledgement of multiplicative and intersecting structures of domination,
To state the problem in general terms: there is concern that Luke has granted a certain set of andres privileged places in the early Jesus movement and plotted a series of relationships among them—so that James and Peter take central roles in authorizing Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. Philip, Stephen and Barnabas also come into play. There is desire to re-plot these relationships, to question the central role of the Jerusalem church, to give Antioch its proper due. There is desire to juggle the balls in a different order. But are not the same balls still being juggled? James, Peter, Paul, Philip, Stephen, Barnabas—the andres whom Theophilus would regard as fitting subjects of his historia. I would suggest that through resisting this kyriocentric framework, we will be rewarded with better—that is, richer, more detailed, and more useful—histories of Christian origins.

By arguing that a feminist frame produces a “better” history, I do not mean to suggest that feminists are somehow granted privileged access to the “bedrock” of historical realia. None of us have access to this reality, but only to language by which this past might be evoked, but never captured. The feminist frame is better, rather, because it gathers in more details—it exhibits more imagination regarding the range of players, and the variety of possibilities for their roles and agency. Moreover, it is better because it does a measure of justice to those whose voices have been obliterated from the historical record, and because such historical remembrance provides a measure of fuel for the present-day struggles of marginalized groups.

For Acts scholars, an added bonus of this type of history is that it helps to free us from the trap of the dreaded Charter Myth. For example, if one were to take as a point of departure in redescribing Christian origins, Jane Schaberg’s provocative and compelling arguments that Mary Magdalene “invented Christianity,” it would be impossible to remain within Acts’ charter myth of Christian origins, since one of Luke’s rhetorical aims in constructing his narrative appears to be the obliteration of Mary Magdalene’s contributions to early Christian formation from the historical record. If one were to privilege Mary


5. Cf. Elizabeth Clark’s agreement with Gareth Stedman Jones that “History . . . is an enterprise that takes place in the present and is constructed entirely in the head” (History, Theory Text, x).

6. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues these points in several of her works; in addition to Rhetoric and Ethic, see, for example, “The Rhetoricity of Historical Knowledge: Pauline Discourse and Its Contextualizations.” See M. de Certeau’s understanding of historiographical practice as resuscitating the dead (The Writing of History, 35–47).

7. See Jane Schaberg, The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene.
Magdalene’s role, it would be easier to resist Acts’ assertion of Peter’s primacy, and then further to recognize other statements of Petrine primacy (e.g., 1 Cor 15:5; Luke 24:34; John 21) as assertions in the midst of contest, rather than as data reflecting authority “as it really was.”

From a feminist standpoint, I hold as first principles both that slaves and other wo/men were agents and actors in early Christian history, and that the author of Acts has done considerable work to erase the signs of that agency and struggle from his narrative. These observations and their implications for how I read the Pentecost narrative will be more fully elaborated below. But I first consider anew the question, “Did Christianity begin at . . . .”

CHRISTIAN ORIGINS?

It is not heuristically profitable to search for a precise point in time in which Gentile Christianity emerges. The idea of fixity, both in terms of a point in time, and in terms of the thing that emerged at that point, belie the fact that Christianities were (and still are) constructions over time through social processes, and not one essence emerging at a point. Christianity did not begin at the crucifixion, or at the Pentecost, or at the stoning of Stephen, or at the Council of Nicaea. A better heuristic model for understanding development from the time of the Jewish Jesus movement to the time in which Christianity came to be spoken of as a religion that was Not-Judaism, is a massive unwieldy construction project—one that required constant negotiation across a number of sites where struggles played out over the precise architectural nature of the edifice. This model would also allow that the construction of Christian identity

8. A sampling of indications that slaves were agents and actors in the early Jesus movement: 1 Cor 7:21; Gal 3:28; Ign. Pol. 4.3; Pliny Ep. 10.96.8; a sampling concerning women: Romans 16; 1 Corinthians; John 20; Gospel of Mary Magdalene. Narratives indicating a struggle over the agency of slaves and women include all of these texts, along with the household codes and pastoral epistles of the Christian Testament, the writings of the anti-Montanist heresiologists, and—as I shall demonstrate below—Acts 2.


Nominee in the category “most malicious act of character defamation by a New Testament author”: Luke 8:2, “. . . Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven devils had gone out. . . .”

9. Hence in their programmatic essay, Castelli and Taussig call for “the study of Christian beginnings [to] focus on patterns of emergence rather than a single point of origin,” and to “imagine that which is studied [to be] characterized by development and process rather than by miracle or revolution” (“Drawing Large and Startling Figures,” 10). Cf. also Denise Kimber Buell, Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity, 25–29.
required the concurrent construction—over the same centuries, with related elements of contest and struggle—of Judaism as something that Christianity was not.

Therefore, though I happily place Acts in the second century, a dating which I understand to be the consensus position of the Acts seminar, it is not useful to understand this dating to mean that Acts is written after some specific point at which Christianity has begun, much less that Acts 2 has captured that point. In the first third of the second century, it is still more appropriate to speak of the author of Acts as involved in “boundary construction” of The Way, or Christianity, rather than “boundary maintenance.” To be sure, the author of Acts does indeed inscribe a narrative in which Jesus believers form a distinct social group whose ties with Jewish non-believers are a thing of the past. But Acts’ assertion that relations between Jesus believers and non-believing Jews are a thing of the past remains a point of contestation for centuries, as texts such as Chrysostom’s Homilies against the Jews and the Pseudo-Clementine literature clearly show.

Adopting the model and terminology employed by Daniel Boyarin, one might say that the author of Acts is an early “border agent” working to fix barriers and hence to construct two unified and distinct social/religious entities called Judaism and Christianity (or better, working to fix barriers between his version of Christianity, with Judaism on the one side, and heresy on the other). But he is an early player, laying bricks in his particular region of the ancient Mediterranean for the “borderline” between Judaism and Christianity that will not be firmly and broadly erected for some centuries.

While Acts lays foundation stones for the edifice of a version of Christianity that is Not-Judaism—a version so like that of many of our Protestant Christianities that is naturalized and nearly unquestionable—it should also be noted that its author is not in full possession of the categories that later constructors of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism will eventually possess. That is, Acts does not own the fully stocked semantic toolbox available to later constructors of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism, one that would enable him to confidently name fellow believers as “Christians/

10. See Daniel Boyarin, Dying For God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism, esp. 1–19 and Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity, esp. 1–33.
11. While I cannot embrace the terminology of boundary formation vs. boundary maintenance used by Lawrence Wills (“Depiction of Jews in Acts”), we agree on the basic tenor of Acts’ view of Jews, on which see more below.
12. If we understand the job description of Acts as boundary maintenance, the rewriting of Acts’ etiology of the Gentile mission in the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.27–71 alone would require that he receive a failing performance review. However carefully Luke was laying and/or policing the bricks, both the Acts of Paul and the Recognitions 1.27–71 make clear that others stole those bricks for use in different construction projects.
not Jews.”¹³ This leads to the conceptual awkwardness evident in passages such as Acts 18:24–28, where “the Jew Apollo [Ἰουδαῖος τις Απολλῶς]” is noted for powerfully and publicly “refuting the Jews” [ἐυτόνως τοῖς Ἰουδαῖοις διακατηλέγχετο δημοσίᾳ]. It could be said that the rupture enacted by “the Jew” upon “the Jews” in this particular passage—Ἰουδαῖος τις ευτόνως τοῖς Ἰουδαῖοις διακατηλέγχετο—captures precisely both the split Acts asserts, and the confusion the narrative has in naming it. Acts is a book in which individual Jews—Apollo, Peter and quintessentially Paul—“vehemently refute the Jews” by proving Jesus is Christ (cf. 9:22). While asserting two distinct groups, Acts has still not embraced unequivocally the name by which Christ believers will come to be named.¹⁴

CHRISTIAN BUILDING BLOCKS in the PENTECOST NARRATIVE

I move now closer to the question of beginnings and Pentecost, while still rephrasing the question. Instead of attempting an answer at the question, “Did Christianity begin at Pentecost,” the question here posed is: What part does the Pentecost story play in Luke’s attempt rhetorically to construct Christianity as a movement suitable to the sensibilities of Theophilus?¹⁵ What follows is not an exhaustive answer, but a highlighting of salient features of Acts 2, in view of my feminist historiographical interest. Under consideration below are 1) prophecy and wo/men, 2) the values undergirding Acts’ universalism, and 3) the conditions under which one might be saved according to Peter’s speech.

Who Prophesies?

In a cursory scanning of the Pentecost pericope for traces of the agency and struggles of the marginalized, one might first assume that Luke has assigned them places of privilege. Peter’s speech explicitly marks sons and daughters, young and old, male and female slaves as prophetic agents, asserting that the

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¹³ A related instance of an author concerned to distinguish Christians from Jews, but who also exhibits a measure of category confusion, is Hegesippus. In a throwback to the language of the divided kingdom under Solomon, he characterizes the “Jewish” enemy/other as “those with different opinions among the circumcision, among the sons of Israel [ἡσαν δὲ γνώμαι διάφοροι ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ ἐν νῦν Ἰσραήλιτών]” These stand against his own group, whom we might call Christians, but whom he marks as “the tribe of Judah and the Messiah [τῆς φυλῆς ὸυδα καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ]” (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 4.22.7).

¹⁴ Richard Pervo seems to have pegged the issue correctly here by suggesting that Luke avoids the term “Christian,” because it suggests for him factionalism and/or sectarianism. Acts does not wish to cast the movement as merely a hairesis within Judaism—alongside the parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees—but rather as something all-encompassing, “true Israel,” as opposed to “false Israel.” See Dating Acts, 168–69.

¹⁵ Here assuming Theophilus as an ideal reader, without making argument for a correlation between this ideal reader and a historical Theophilus who might have existed in history.
language miracle has fulfilled a utopian, relatively egalitarian promise of Joel.¹⁶ On further inspection, it is difficult to find any such agents in the text who might have prompted Peter to cite this particular prophetic passage. While the images Luke associates with Pentecost are vivid and dramatic—sudden and violent wind, flaming tongues, the simultaneous outpouring of multiple languages—actual description of the speakers themselves is quite vague. Who stands behind the πάντες and the οὕτωι upon whom the Spirit’s fire descends? Presumably, “these” in 2:15 who are not drunk but prophesying are distinct from Peter and the eleven who stand in their defense (2:14). Presumably they are (of?) the one hundred and twenty “brothers (and sisters?)” in 1:15, and possibly they include the women in 1:14, of whom only Jesus’ mother merits a name.¹⁷ Whatever the identity of the prophetic speakers, their language miracle is firmly embedded within a “manly” narrative. Preceded immediately by the story of the replacement of Judas, which restricts the apostolic role to men (1:21–26), the Pentecost pericope is staged as part of the public speech and deliberation taking place within circles of ἄνδρες Ιουδαίοι (2.5, 14), ἄνδρες Ἰουδαίοι (2:22), and ἄνδρες ἀδέλφοι (2:29, 37).¹⁸ In the larger text of Acts, the only slave actually depicted as prophesying is also the only prophesying woman, but she is not a believer, her spirit is of an inferior sort, and her appearance in the text may be something of a joke (16:16–18). In short, the Pentecost narrative simultaneously evokes a utopian and egalitarian vision of prophetic practice, while trapping it within a kyriocentric frame in which no women or slaves utter true prophecy.¹⁹

¹⁶. Here, understanding egalitarian impulses on a continuum. It is more egalitarian to grant that women and slaves could have the power of prophecy than to imagine them silent. Imagining a slave-free utopia would, of course, be even more egalitarian.

¹⁷. On the view that the syntax of 1:14 suggests that these women are the disciples’ wives, see K. Lake and H. Cadbury, eds. Translation and Commentary, p. 11.

¹⁸. On the frequency and significance of Luke’s employment of ANHP language, see D’Angelo, “The ANHP Question.” D’Angelo argues that both the author’s careful distinctions between roles for women and men as well as the frequency of “men/man” as a form of address stem from “the desire to depict the Christian message and its messengers—the speeches and speakers—as ambassadors suitable for the public and civic forum” (52). The alignment of gender positions in Acts with the presentation of gender in the imperial propaganda of Trajan and Hadrian leads D’Angelo to read Acts as a second-century composition.

¹⁹. This rhetorical evocation of egalitarian prophecy within a narrative that gives no further hint of egalitarian prophetic practice is not unlike Acts’ rhetorical evocation of extreme mercy through the depiction of Stephen praying forgiveness on his tormentors. While Stephen might plea for such mercy, the text gives no hint that his request is ever granted, or that its author evinces any such mercy for Stephen’s tormentors. That Acts asserts extreme mercy toward persecutors as a Christian proprium while making sure that those persecutors do not benefit from that mercy, is a subject of analysis in my book Perfect Martyr: the Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity.

L. M. White has suggested that Peter’s ecstatic vision in Acts 10 harkens back to 2:17: οἱ νεανίσκοι οὐκ ὄψασας οὕτωσι (‘The Pentecost Event: Lukan Redaction and Themes in Acts 2′). It would be perfectly in keeping with Acts’ rhetorical aims to allow only a man like Peter to fulfill an aspect of Joel’s prophecy.
Who is absorbed?

Looking for signs that the author of Acts might be interested in constructing an ethnically and racially diverse form of Christianity, one might pause at the table of nations to note the vast array of peoples assembled to hear the variety of languages which the prophets of Pentecost are given ability to speak—Phrygians, Egyptians, Arabs, etc. The wide array of peoples evoked by Acts here has long been understood as the hallmark of the distinction between Judaism and Christianity, the former with its crippling sark: bound particularity, the latter with its universally accessible and enlightened Spirit. Hence those who point to the Pentecost as the place where Christianity was born might do so because, even though the audience is composed of Jews (and proselytes) from all of these nations, their places of origin portend Christianity’s reach, and Christianity’s signature distinction: “inclusivity” beyond the bounds of race and nation. While Luke certainly understands Christianity as something that should expand to the ends of the earth, this expansiveness should be read in terms of Luke’s embrace of Roman values of hegemony and world dominance, rather than his embrace of Edomite, or Phrygian or Cyrenian values. His perspective on the foreign mirrors Roman perspectives and values, and includes typical imperial views of the subjugated—for example, the Lystrans are yokels (14:8–18); the natives (barbaroi) of Malta are exotic, but friendly (28:1–10); the loudaioi are prone to rebellion.

Who is saved?

Peter’s Pentecost speech, with its depiction of Israelites as Christ-killers, who may be saved through repentance and conversion, offers further indications of the Christianity Acts is constructing. The dual reference to Israelites as the “you” who crucified Christ (2:23.36) adumbrates one of the key distinctions Acts will propose between unbelieving Jews and Christians: in the Acts’ narrative, to be an (unbelieving) Jew is to be a persecutor; to be a Christian is to be persecuted (by unbelieving Jews). This distinction is perhaps seen most clearly

20. On the problem of Christian claims to universalism and race-lessness, see the insightful arguments of Buell, Why This New Race?
22. D’Angelo helpfully notes that Acts depicts Christians as having an ability to embody Roman values that is superior to that possessed by the Romans.
in the Saul-persecutor/Paul-persecuted thread, but is expressed also in the multiple accusations of Christ-killing that run throughout the Jerusalem section of Acts, beginning with the Pentecost speech. Moreover, the links between “having killed,” the need for repentance, and the requirement of conversion to belief in Christ in order to be saved (2:36–40) make clear both the moral depravity of unbeliving Jews, and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ, teachings which will come to undergird hegemonic forms of Christianity.

It is here, when considering Peter’s answer to the question of what the men of the house of Israel should do—repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus—that one might raise the question of Acts’ view the Jews. This question has been framed in scholarship for the past several decades as a matter of whether Luke has “written off” all Jews, or merely those who disagree with him. Given the unambiguous nature of Acts’ insistence that all Jews must repent and turn to belief in Jesus as messiah to avoid eternal condemnation, there is surprisingly little acknowledgement of how thin the difference between these two positions is. In spite of this thin difference, scholars who stress that Luke embraces both Jewish symbols and Jewish converts frequently slide into conclusions that Luke holds a “positive” or “open” stance toward Judaism, and that therefore, Luke cannot be regarded as “anti-Jewish.” Missing here is acknowledgement that standing

23. On the centrality of the persecutor/persecuted binary to Acts’ construction of Christianity as Not-Judaism, cf. Beth A. Berkowitz (Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures, 191) on Paul’s conversion in Acts: “This paradigm shows conversion to Christ to be a conversion from persecutor to persecuted. Whereas the pre-conversion Saul binds ‘all those who call upon your name’ . . . (9:14), the post-conversion Paul suffers ‘for my name’ . . . (9:16); the Šaul who was consenting to Stephen’s execution (anairesis) becomes the one whom others want to execute (anolein, 9:23, 24, 29). What it means to join the Christian community is to shift from executioner to executed, from judge to judged, from jailer to imprisoned. This shift is not incidental to Saul’s conversion but constitutive of it.”


alongside the embrace of Jewish symbols and Jewish believers are the negative depictions and violent condemnations of virtually all unbelieving Jews.\(^{26}\)

To summarize my argument in this section, key elements of the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 that adumbrate distinguishing features of the kind of Christianity that the author of Acts attempts to construct include the following: 1) While evoking the eschatological vision of Joel, whereby prophecy, vision and dream are poured without respect to gender and status, Acts simultaneously restricts such charismata to the central male heroes of his story; 2) The audience of the Pentecost miracle evokes a broad geographic expanse. In ways that allude to Roman desire for world domination, the author of Acts envisions Christian witness as reaching to the ends of the earth; 3) Peter’s accusation that his audience has killed Christ, as well as his subsequent exhortation that they need to repent and convert, adumbrate a theme that predominates in the narrative: Jews are killers, whose only hope for redemption is to become Christians. While Acts’ version of Christianity does not immediately carry the day, these three features of it—elite male privilege, totalizing vision, and anti-Jewish sentiment expressed through the elision of the categories “unbeliever” and “morally depraved”—have been relatively stable aspects of Christianity since the time of Acts’ widespread acceptance.

**FIRST-CENTURY PENTECOST?**

There is no compelling reason to understand Acts 2 as containing any source material that stems from a miraculous first-century language event in Jerusalem.\(^{27}\) However, it is apparent, especially from I Corinthians, that communal language events such as tongues and prophecy were important to early Jesus believers, including early Gentile Jesus believers in Paul’s orbit. While the question of what Luke knows about Magdalene traditions in less clear than

26. The conclusion of Brawley (“God of Promises,” 296) is a typical sort of reading for those who insist that Acts 28 does not bar Jews from salvation. Brawley argues that his is an “ethical reading,” of Acts, because he has reached the conclusion that Paul preaches to all, including Jews. However, when Brawley writes that the conclusion of Acts includes the message that “God will heal Jews. . . who turn,” he provides no ethical reflection on the obvious fact that Luke means specifically “those Jews who turn to Christ belief.” Brawley’s entire concluding paragraph on Luke, the Jews and salvation uses only God-language, and not Christ-language, thereby eliding the christo-centric and exclusivist force of salvation in Acts.

27. L. M. White’s rebuttal of G. Lüdemann’s list of historical features of the Pentecost is compatible with my own view. His conclusion: “In the final analysis, we need not resort to elaborate hypotheses regarding the ‘sources’ of Luke’s [Pentecost] composition; they are clear and have long been known. Luke combines Markan and Q motifs from the Jesus narrative with Pauline theological elements and oral traditions and a thoroughgoing knowledge of LXX language all worked together into a peculiarly Lukan narrative. Parallels and thematic motifs are worked forward and backward in the narrative to create continuity and undergird the historiographical and theological agenda” (“The Pentecost Event,” 102).
what he knows about Pauline traditions, John 20 along with so-called Gnostic materials also suggest that “Magdalene” Christians valued prophecy and other charismata.28 In both Corinthian and Magdalene circles, then, as well as in later prophetic movements of the so-called “Montanists,” questions of prophecy were closely linked with questions of gender and authority—i.e. “Can wo/men speak for God?” 29 I conclude then, that in the first century, significant numbers of early Jesus believers—including slaves and other wo/men—understood spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy, vision and dreams as central to their experience. But this conclusion is reached largely in spite of, rather than because of, Acts 2.

Here it may be instructive to compare Acts’ treatment of central controversies in Galatians—Paul’s apostolic authority, table fellowship and circumcision—with its treatment of central controversies in Corinthians—women’s leadership and the ordering of charismata. The issues from Galatians rise front and center in Acts: Paul’s authority vis-à-vis the Jerusalem apostles is clearly demarcated; controversies regarding circumcision and table fellowship are explicitly raised, debated and resolved. In contrast to the Corinthian correspondence, gender and charismata are not issues of debate in Acts. No debate is necessary because no question is raised. Acts seems to have absorbed entirely Paul’s expressed desires and concerns in 1 Corinthians 14. The “tongues” of Acts 2 are intelligible (1 Cor 14:9: διὰ τῆς γλώσσης ἐὰν μὴ εὑσιμον λόγον δώτε, ἡμὺς γνωσθήσεται τὸ λαλούμενον;) and no woman is permitted to speak (1 Cor 14:34).

Perhaps the most striking thing about Acts’ version of the Pentecost is the lengthy quotation from the prophet Joel. The fact that Acts 2 evokes prophesying slaves and women even though the narrative obscures them from view, could be considered a “rupture” in Acts—a gap in the text where the author of Acts unintentionally reveals what he otherwise hopes to conceal.30 Here is exposed a trace of a continuing struggle over the significance of the Jesus movement for wo/men.

28. See especially Schaberg, Resurrection of Mary Magdalene for the argument that Magdalene texts preserve traces suggesting that in the manner of Elijah/Elisha, Mary was revered in some circles as Jesus’ prophetic successor.

29. Or, to cite words attributed to the one who was granted the power to bind and loose, “Has the savior spoken secretly to a woman and not openly so that we would all hear? Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we are?” (Gosp Mary, 10.3–4 [trans. SV]).

30. On attention to gaps, ruptures and absences in texts by scholars whom she classifies as the “New Intellectual Historians;” see Clark, History, Theory, Text, 113–24.
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Did Christianity Begin at Pentecost?

BEGINNINGS AND THE ENDS THEREOF

In Memory of Daryl D. Schmidt (1944–2006)

Todd Penner

One of the special characteristics of thought ever since the eighteenth century is an obsession with beginnings that seems to infect and render exceedingly problematic the location of a beginning. . . . A beginning is a formal appetite imposing a severe discipline on the mind that wants to think every turn of its thoughts from the start. Thoughts then appear related to one another in a meaningful series of constantly experienced moments.

—Edward Said

To ask the question of beginnings is fundamentally to inquire about originary moments in human history and tradition. It is also in some sense to reify the very notion of a beginning point to begin with. Indeed, even to answer “Did Christianity begin at Pentecost?” in the negative is to affirm the “truth” of an

1. The major redactional work on this piece was conducted in the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary (New York) in the summer of 2010. I am indebted to John Weaver, the library’s director, for his invitation to become a scholar-in-residence in this most hallowed place, which is dedicated to the preservation of the memory of Biblical scholarship as a discipline and a habitus. Special thanks goes to my comrade and fellow scholar-in-residence, Davina Lopez, for her invaluable feedback and encouragement on this piece. The original paper upon which this essay is based was delivered in Santa Rosa in the fall of 2006. I am grateful for the invitation by Dennis Smith to participate in the inaugural session of the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins. I would not have entertained attending the Westar meeting had it not been for a series of email exchanges I had with Daryl Schmidt in late February of 2006, but days (it seemed) before it was discovered that he was in the advanced and final stages of colon cancer. A fellow Anabaptist, Daryl had been a model for me as a scholar. His friendly challenge to me to “try Westar out for yourself, don’t pre-judge the group based on the influence of others” was a request I could not refuse nor refuse. I have found his model of scholarship and humanity (and especially the combination of the two) to be something I aspire to (even as I often fall short); that is, placing a welcoming and open-minded spirit and a passionately committed intellect in service of a deep-rooted Anabaptist value: it matters not what you say, only what you do. This essay is dedicated to Daryl’s haunting memory, as much as it is to his hallowed spirit that (I hope) lives on.

origin in the very act of negating one particular version (i.e., it must have originated elsewhere and under differing circumstances, since we are not questioning whether early Christianity can really be conceived of as having a “beginning” point at all, that understood as a precise temporal “birth” moment in the past). It may well be, as Said notes in the above quote, that beginnings are so formative to our way of constructing the world that it would appear absurd not to think about beginnings in terms of formative Christianity. Certainly the modern period of scholarship over the last 200 years can be characterized as being effectively preoccupied with origins, particularly the reconstruction of originary points and then successive stages in the development of Christianity as it moves (perhaps with a dogged Hegelian determinism) towards ever more complex forms of thought and life. We might well trace our current fascination to predecessors like Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and William Wrede (1859–1906), but that would only be one layer in the deeper reservoir of cultural interest—in the end it may be more accurate to think of Descartes or, even earlier, Erasmus (or even Eusebius and Josephus). The continuing production of scholarship on Christian origins, Acts, “James of Jerusalem,” Paul and so forth suggests that this “quest” for origins is in no way abating either. The time might be ripe to query where we are going with all of this interest in beginnings and beginningness. What, in fact, is (at) the end of this obsession with origins?

The question before the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins in this, the inauguration of its quest, is precisely one of beginnings—in particular, is the origins of the Christian movement to be grounded (in some fashion) in a Pentecost event such as is described in Acts 2? Of course, already, before we even begin, we are faced with a host of methodological conundrums. What does one mean, for instance, by “Christianity” in this particular instance (and we do seem to be talking about “Christianity” in the singular, itself a dubious category from which to start)? Is this Christianity a historical/social/cultural/political phenomenon or just the Christianity described by Acts (and how are those two to be equated/differentiated)? Are we then seeking to inquire if the acts described in Acts 2 are in fact historical (to the exclusion of them being arbitrary signifiers of a type of historical reality)? That is, did they really happen? And is historical fact, in this way, also related to “beginnings”? In other words, if Acts 2 were actually a description of an early Christian event would this then demand that Christianity also originated in this moment? Or, for that matter, if the “description” of the unfolding miracle in Acts 2 were shown to be un/nonhistorical—or, even better, impossible (did not Hume show us that—and, if so, why are we still engaging that question?)—would that still imply that Christianity as an ancient religious movement did not actually begin on a Pentecost (with perhaps some imbibing of potent wine—i.e., they were in fact “drunken as you suppose”)? It is not clear, then, what we have proven—if anything—if we have exposed Acts 2 to be historical or un/nonhistorical. To be fair, it is not clear what criteria one would establish that could do either. So much of this interest in and investigation of historical detail depends, in the end, on one’s presuppositions about
the nature and experience of reality—in which case we have not moved much beyond the debate between Walter Richard Cassels (1826–1907) and Bishop B. J. Lightfoot (1828–1889), now over 130 years old. Cassels’ *Supernatural Religion* was published anonymously in 1874, and subsequently received open refutation by Lightfoot in a series of published essays between 1874 and 1877.

Admittedly, when I began this investigation into origins and Pentecost I thought the answer would be clear, at least from the perspective of the weighty scholarship on the issue: of course Christianity did not begin at Pentecost! Yet I found my investigation into some recent thinking on the matter rather revealing, particularly from the standpoint of this interest in “beginnings.” Perhaps I had rushed to judgment too soon. And, more importantly, perchance I was thinking too narrowly of beginnings to begin with, especially since it seems that the majority of “critical” scholars actually appear to believe that Acts 2 formed an originary point of one sort or another with respect to the history of Christianity. I would note, at the outset, two critical points that will shape my ensuing discussion. First, there is, in my mind, a theological question that is driving most of this research. While often passing under the guise of (quasi-objective) historical investigation, some of the key framings of the discussion and, indeed, the methods that are deployed therein, are premised on theological convictions that are implicit in much research on early Christianity. It is nearly impossible to escape the grasp of theology. Second, the quest for a beginning already assumes a telos, an end. It is nearly impossible to posit a beginning point without also inferring from that coordinate an endpoint that one either implicitly or explicitly assumes to be the resultant conclusion. In fact, one might argue (although I will not do so here) that the end determines the beginning. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) once observed that the end of time replicated in its essential unfolding key elements of the beginning of time (“Urzeit ist Endzeit”). Gunkel was referring to the theme of creation and chaos as traced out in Genesis 1 and Revelation 12. As a broader metaphor, however, this principle also applies to the manner in which we posit historical beginnings and endings. Every beginning point contains within it the seeds of its ending. Moreover, every beginning point bears in it an implied genealogy of development in relation to which the interpreter her- or himself is to be positioned in some way.

**PENTECOST and BEGINNINGS**

Looking over the scholarship on Acts 2, the first study that jumped out at me in terms of recent work on the subject was Eckhard Schnabel’s massive treatment of early Christian missionary practice. This two volume tome is the single most extensive engagement of the “mission and expansion” of the Christian movement, clearly intended as a replacement of Adolf von Harnack’s seminal work

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3. Cassels’ *Supernatural Religion* was published anonymously in 1874, and subsequently received open refutation by Lightfoot in a series of published essays between 1874 and 1877.
The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries [ET of 2d
German ed. = 1908]). In terms of the sheer weight of the volumes, Schnabel wins
hands down (in terms of the weightiness of arguments, however, that is more
contestable). Striking for me as a reader of Schnabel’s analysis of the Pentecost
episode is the startling degree to which he simply interprets it as providing
historical data, clear and simple. His major engagement of debate surrounds
the historical character of Peter’s speech, but here he rather easily affirms the
(Colin J.) Hemer- (Stanley E.) Porter trajectory regarding the accuracy (and
historical actuality) of the Acts speeches. I am not particularly interested in
contesting Schnabel’s view of events. I do not think that is helpful (or really possi-
ble). That said, I am rather intrigued by the overall simplicity of the reading.
For Schnabel, of course, Christianity does not begin at Pentecost (and neither
does the missionary impulse); it all goes back to Jesus. Still, it is remarkable that
he works with Acts 2 as if one were working with a snapshot taken on the oc-
casion (and as if the last 100 years of scholarship on Acts post-Martin Dibelius
[1883–1947] had not existed). His main effort is to situate this “narrative” event
within a historical context (and even cultural considerations take a backseat).
The tendency in traditional historical approaches, particularly those indebted
to the philological enterprises of the eighteenth century, has been to view a
historical text “as the representation of complex, collective phenomena in an in-
reducibly particular mode.” Despite his presumed indebtedness to this earlier
tradition of historical inquiry, the later classical studies emphasis evident in the
F. F. Bruce (and to some extent also in the Martin Hengel) trajectory of scholar-
ship on early Christian texts and traditions is eminently evident in Schnabel’s
approach. As a result, there is little that is historically complex or materially
collective in Schnabel’s assessment of the evidence—nor is there even any real
recognition of the “irreducibly particular nature” of this material either. There
is, in fact, no assessment of, never mind appreciation of, any deep-rooted his-
torical senses and processes as they might be reflected in an ancient text.

A complex reading strategy is certainly lacking in Schnabel’s analysis of the
Pentecost episode in Acts. Even C. K. Barrett, in his “classically”-modeled com-
mentary on Acts, is much more appreciative of the complexity of the material,
and is rather circumspect with regard to easy resolution of the various historical
issues underlying the scenario. In some sense, the corollary to Schnabel’s ap-
proach is the reproduction of the narrative that one finds in Tannehill’s literary-
critical commentary on Acts 2. It might be surprising at first glance to compare
Schnabel and Tannehill in this way, since they both clearly could represent (and

would normally be taken to represent) differing standpoints vis-à-vis the nature of a text as text. Tannehill, for instance, generally by-passes historical questions. In my estimation, however, what is striking is precisely that both approaches affirm rather readily the unique nature of the events described in Acts 2. That is, Schnabel confirms the theo-historical importance of Pentecost for the early Christian mission, while Tannehill reproduces the theo-literary significance of Pentecost, especially in terms of its linkage with the broader narrative integrity of Acts. In some sense, though, Schnabel is similarly working from an assumption of the narrative integrity of Acts, and his interpretative results, in principle, differ little from Tannehill’s. I find that rather remarkable actually. My criticism rests less with Schnabel’s understanding of history and more with literary-critical approaches more generally, which often, in my view, manufacture narrative coherence and consistency while at the same time producing theological “deep structures” in Lukan narrative argumentation.5 In the end, these literary readings, for all intents and purposes, substitute for historical argumentations (whether or not the scholar in question is fully aware of that). Schnabel in some sense is more “honest” in his approach, even if tremendously naïve regarding the complexity of the recording of “actual” historical events, which modern critical approaches—i.e., the “linguistic turn”—have argued to be linguistically formulated and as such impossible to reduce to actual historical occurrences—at best they are impressions of historical events. In an ironic twist, then, Schnabel’s rather straight-forward reading of the narrative replicates the effects and ends of literary reading strategies—there is, finally, no significant gap between the two. And both are deeply theological in their intended outcome, reproducing on all levels, then, the basic rhetorical structure of this episode and its function (or lack thereof) in the Lukan narrative. These kinds of straightforward historical and literary readings replicate the literary-rhetorical strategies of Lukan composition, while also magnifying them. In this way, the reading practice fostered by these scholars—focusing on linear, unifying, coherent structures of narration—serves to discipline the reader toward observing ever deeper theological, narrative, and historical structures of meaning in the text. In the process, historical reading produces historical intertextures in much the same way that literary reading generates intertextual connections. The signification of both reading practices is the same: there is a deep historic-theological import to the Lukan text.

In this light, both Schnabel and Tannehill— to the degree that it is in fact consistent with Luke’s intention or point of view—understand the Pentecost

5. The work of David Moessner is illustrative of this point. His now “classic” study, *The Lord of the Banquet*, aptly illustrates this quest for (and indeed theological desire for) deep-rooted structures in the text. Most of his subsequent work on Luke-Acts in the context of ancient historical writing is an attempt to prove the presence of such deep-rooted narrative structures (by seeing them as fundamental to ancient historical-composition strategies).
narrative to be functioning as a “beginning” point. It is a matter of argument, of course, whether Luke himself thinks that his narrative affirms Pentecost as a point of origin over, say, the resurrection or the ascension (or even the killing of Ananias and Sapphira) as the narrative and/or historical beginning of his story or, for that matter, Christianity. Can we distinguish between Luke’s story and Luke’s understanding of the “real” history of Christian origins? Can we conflate the beginning of a story with the beginning of a religio-cultural movement in historical time? That is never actually made clear in the narrative/history; although, presumably, we can infer that Pentecost, in Luke’s view, is at least a stage in the beginning—and a vital one at that. For the purposes of this discussion, perhaps that is as close to an understanding of “beginning” that we will ever be able to divine.

The question remains, however, to what degree divergent modes of analysis offer an alternative in terms of our thinking about Pentecost as an originary event. For instance, will redaction criticism offer us anything new—anything less productive of beginningness? I was curious about that myself, and so I turned to two recent redaction-critical studies, one by A. J. M. Wedderburn (1994) and another by Michael White (2000). I begin with Wedderburn, who offers an extended interaction with Gerd Lüdemann’s redactional analysis of the Pentecost episode. While Wedderburn and Lüdemann are more or less in the same camp in terms of their methodological applications, Wedderburn is more nuanced in his historical sensibilities—he understands, for instance, that the recovery of a “traditional core” or “earlier material” does not necessitate that that element represent a “historical core.”

Wedderburn proposes the use of a single source, which itself already bears the “awkward tensions” we find in the narrative (i.e., within this “source” or “tradition” lies a much more intricate interweaving of even “older” or “earlier” or “pre” traditions). The interesting feature about Wedderburn’s reading is that it allows him to bring a number of theologies into play at the same time, some or all of which no longer function well within the Lukian narrative. For instance, the Pentecost episode has often been linked to Jewish traditions related to the giving of the law (at Mount Sinai), with particular interest in potential connections to Philo’s description of this event in his *On the Decalogue.* There are some fascinating parallels at one level, but there is no serious indication in Luke’s

11. Wedderburn, “Traditions and Redaction,” 39. Still, one should not be led to believe that Wedderburn thinks there is no history in Acts. His latest book on the history and development of earliest Christianity has cleared up any doubt of that (including his repeated affirmation that the beginning of Christianity lies in the encounter with the “risen Christ”). See Wedderburn, *History of the First Christians.*
narrative that he intends to link this outpouring of the spirit with the giving of the law (I come back to this below). Still, Wedderburn, not wanting to miss such a wonderfully theologially rich occasion, nonetheless observes an early Christian contrast between the giving of the law and the giving of the spirit. There is evidently a trace here of a biblical-theological approach to the text, now mediated through an intertextual canon-critical methodology. I will refrain for the moment from my reflections on Wedderburn’s astounding ability to “recover” modern theological formulations in the earlier Christian confessions, and focus rather on the way in which the Pentecost episode becomes a meeting point for him of presumed divergent forms of early Christianity. This larger tradition, in his view, also contains an earlier element related to Peter’s preaching to a large gathering in Jerusalem. The fact that Wedderburn seeks to prove that Luke is the one who limits this speech to Jews is also reflective of a long-standing belief that, already in the formative moments of the birth of Christianity, “Hellenists” were preaching the “gospel” to non-Jews. Wedderburn further affirms that the “list of nations” in Acts 2 is also likely part of the earlier source (although he leaves it open whether or not Luke incorporated this separately). Finally, he suggests that the earlier source contained an account of the eruption of glossalalia in early Christian communities, which may have already been given a xeno-gloss in the pre-Lukan redaction, based on the associations in that tradition of the giving of the spirit with the giving of the law, which included the trope of multi-lingual expression/understanding in some rabbinic sources. Luke is the one who then takes this theme of the tradition and extrapolates it so that it explicitly relates to the gathered group of Jews in Jerusalem who witness the holy spectacle.

Wedderburn’s formulation is interesting in both what it affirms and does not affirm. He is adamant that the historical core is always difficult to reconstruct: we can get to earlier traditions, but actual historicity is much less certain. His articulation also incorporates a significant element of an early presumed Pauline (here one needs to think of a “pre-Pauline” tradition that is later formulated more clearly by Paul—so it can be understood to be Antiochian, or Hellenist in origin) core underlying the Acts 2 narrative, which includes the contrast between spirit and law, preaching to Gentiles, and early Christian ecstatic experiences (glossalalia). Moreover, the theological “encounter of the risen Christ” becomes reified as a historical event precisely because the historical ground of all being cannot be discovered by the work of historical scholarship. In other words, by avoiding the historical issues—the history behind the tradition is

13. For a fuller discussion of the links with the Festival of Weeks (giving of the law at Mount Sinai) and the pouring out of the spirit at Pentecost see J. C. VanderKam, “The Festival of Weeks and the Story of Pentecost.”
15. For more on these connections, see Penner, In Praise of Christian Origins, 29–31.
hidden from view—that leaves the resurrection event as a final unquestionable datum. As such, it stands as a “fact” of origins, which itself can be substituted for any historical event—it becomes a stand-in for history and, as a result, becomes the historical moment in nuce (a moment that cannot be challenged or investigated). I am less interested in Wedderburn’s theological conviction, however, and more curious about his sense of how the Pentecost narrative grounds the beginning of Christianity. True, he understands that the tradition undergoes a certain “catholicizing” in Luke’s hands and that the narrative now in Acts 2 does not reflect the true beginning. But, beneath the surface, as one recovers the tradition that embodies the pre-traditions, one gets closer to the complex theological core of early Christianity, which is undoubtedly at one level a historical core in the sense that these theological and experiential traditions reflect real theologies and experiences of early Christians even if the precise event is nothing but an evolving fiction based on a thousand real encounters. As for beginnings, then, admittedly, for Wedderburn, Acts 2 represents the beginnings of Christianity but in a rather complex way: this current fictional narrative embodies the real beginnings of Christianity and still continues to mediate that moment of origins. Does Christianity begin at Pentecost? It does, for Wedderburn, so long as one understands that this beginning is embedded in, negotiated by, and mediated through earlier sources, not the final redaction, and that the actual historical nature of these mediations is beyond investigation. As such, they represent the “faith(ful)” historical moment of Christian beginnings, which, perhaps not surprisingly, represents a “Pauline” intervention at the earliest stage of the tradition (Jesus is not the ground, Paul is).

Michael White’s study of Acts 2 in some sense seeks to help us out of this quagmire to which this quasi-historicizing approach (which at the same time denies its historical investment) to redaction will inevitably lead. White, like Wedderburn before him, addresses Lüdemann’s previous analysis, this time working to avoid the almost absurd linguistic and cultural twists and turns (of logic) one has to make to reconstruct the “historical core” of the Pentecost episode. In its stead, he offers a compositional approach to Acts 2 that, using Luke’s narrative and theological tendencies, understands redaction in terms of the reworking and reconfiguring of previous written and oral “traditions” and sources in the service of producing and narrativizing this apparently fictional episode. White’s complex argument revolves around the idea that Luke has constructed the Pentecost episode by reconfiguring and redeploying Pauline and Markan thematic and narrative elements within the framework of Luke’s own theological and narrative interests. Thus, for instance, the situating of the scene in Jerusalem comes from “oral tradition” and is based on 1 Cor 15:3–8 and Gal 1:18–24 or traditions similar to those reflected in these texts. Markan and Q texts, alongside eschatological themes pulled from Isaiah (here also under Pauline influence), together with septuagintalizing techniques and influence, all combine to form the “tradition” and “material” out of which Luke com-
poses this Pentecost narrative, which, for Luke, “synthesize[s] key Pauline and Markan themes by retrojecting them as narrative moments into the beginnings: of the preaching of Jesus and the founding of the church.”

Most interesting for my analysis here, then, is that White ends up in not that dissimilar a place from Wedderburn. True, Wedderburn had to dig “down” into the strata of the tradition to recover the theological and narrative elements that Luke takes over and redirects. White, by contrast, expands across the early Christian writings, alighting on the “earlier” and “older” materials of Q, Mark, and Paul. Yet both also affirm the fundamentally theological character of the Pentecost episode in one form or another and both also attest to the early nature of the tradition that is embedded within it. What Wedderburn accomplishes through a historio-traditional recovery White does so similarly through an intertextual mode. There is without a doubt a reinscription here of the basic theological and historical axioms of early Christian scholarship, and certainly nothing new is being ventured in that.

Both also bring to the forefront one other issue that is important to my larger argument: they reify the narrative and theological unity of Luke-Acts on a massive scale. On the one hand, particularly in White’s case, much of his argument depends on a deep commitment to narrative unity in terms of plot structures, and thematic coherence. Wedderburn, admittedly, is less tied to that, although redaction criticism as an enterprise very much depends on the ability to determine and isolate tendencies. As a result, we inevitably confirm the linear reading of narratives that demands, at the very start, a beginning. And it is for this reason that, as we appeal to the intricate narrative structure of Luke-Acts and the intimate theological thematic cohesion of Luke’s vision, we have thereby provided for ourselves the inescapable option of always finding (and in fact necessitating) a beginning even as, at the same time, we may seek to avoid one. I am convinced this is the result of modern reading practices, not ancient ones, although ancient writers were also quite interested in beginnings, even if for differing reasons.

In the end, then, I draw two main conclusions from the above discussion. First, both Wedderburn and White, while at one level clearly not affirming that Christianity began at Pentecost (because the episode as we now have it, in their minds, is a Lukan construction based on “tradition”), nonetheless at a fundamental level do end up actually confirming the centrality of Acts 2 in terms of its embodying and effusing beginningness: inhering within it are those traditions that mark Christianity as its unique self. Further, in the process, all the “canonical” assumptions related to the development of early Christianity are reconstituted on another level. So, the irony is that Pentecost as the originary moment is thrown out only to reappear on a literary and theological level, thus investing Acts 2 with an über-originary role in the foundation of Christianity.

In short, whereas Schnabel still kept the Pentecost events on a quasi-historical plane, White and Wedderburn have turned Pentecost into a hyperreal mythology of Christian origins, which, by creating a powerful historical imaginary, thereby entrenches that event as an all more powerful moment of origins in our historical imagination. We are thus unceasingly haunted by Pentecost beginnings in the very moment of thinking we are resisting such.

A big part of this phenomenon is that we have misconstrued how historical imagination operates. It is not just about an objective form of historical investigation; that is but one prong of a larger view of history that has more to do with modern (even if sublimated and not-conscious) philosophical notions related to the Spirit in History, not unlike what we see in the earlier work of Hegel [1770–1831]. These in turn are reified in the existential and phenomenological presuppositions and theologies embedded in our historical, form, tradition, and redactional approaches to early Christian materials.

Second, in some sense, then, White and Wedderburn, like Schnabel and Tannehill, have no choice but to stumble into this larger problem of the historical imagination, and its desire for an origin and beginning. One way or another, whether we like it or not, Acts 2 seeks to reproduce its role as the originary moment, or at least a vital stage in that beginning. There are different ways of articulating this phenomenon. One could speak, for instance, about the creation of mimetic desire in reading a text, or the effective interpretative performativity forced upon us by the text, or, more conventionally, the rhetorical power and drive of the text.17 Perhaps the latter is most appropriate in this context—the text itself is rhetorically constructed so as to reproduce its inner logic in the very act of reading it. And the certain modern obsession with originary moments—one might even go so far as to designate this as a “fetishism of beginniness”—has its roots in this power of the text that generates this need in the first place. As I have argued elsewhere, Luke is an excellent rhetorician and the effect of that rhetoric is that, insofar as Acts 2 is engaged as the (or at least an) originary moment of/in Christianity, it is very likely that one will always already reproduce the beginniness of that narrative on one level or another. There is, after all, good reason why this version of Christian origins has dominated the ancient and modern conception: it is persuasive on multiple levels.

Modern scholarship has not and cannot escape this desire for origins, even as the stated position by many scholars is that such origin-quests always end in failure. Regardless of whether one engages the historical, theo-historical, or literary-historical (I would be reticent to draw any distinction between these at the basic level), the Pentecost event of Acts 2 forms the inescapable (even if not-

17. One might add here as well something akin to R. Barthes’s notion of “the pleasure of the text,” where the refusal of the text to “answer” our deepest questions in fact creates pleasure through deferral (here the erotics and sensuality of undecidability in textual interpretation). See further T. Penner and L. Cates, “Textually Violating Dinah,” 37.1–37.2, 37.10, 37.13–14.
conscious) point of origins for critical scholarship. And, lest we think that any real departure is to be found in all of our attempts to discover the framework of multiplication of the threads that come together in the Acts 2 narrative, the complexity of that process and its relationship to history, and the presence of seeming infinitely irreducible strands of tradition going back into a historical past, we should note that the end result is remarkably consistent: we have a beginning that is mediated in some manner and form in the Acts 2 account (indeed, that beginning might even entail, miraculously it would seem, the sudden appearance of Paul in the “upper room,” if scholars like Wedderburn and White are to be believed). Here I would take the words of David Harvey as cautionary: the modern accent on the freedom of the scholar (unfettered in interpretation), coupled with a fixation on individuality and uniqueness, lead to a situation wherein modernism “took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing for what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality.”\(^{18}\) In other words, what I have been arguing above, is that scholars of early Christianity are always affirming some kind of underlying reality, some essential beginning point, which the narrative in Acts 2 signifies. Thus, in some very critical ways, no matter how far we seek to run from, to rifle through or dig under the narrative, we are always affirming that narrative as a beginning, as a signifier of an originary moment, of a “real” underlying “event,” of a point of beginningness, without which we cannot imagine, never mind begin to investigate, early Christianity as a historical phenomenon.

By way of engaging this matter further and pushing the question in a different direction, I now turn to my own assessment of the Pentecost episode. I accomplish this end by offering a series of “theses” (randomly selected and sequenced) that, while intentionally provisional and programmatic, I hope will lay some new ground for conceptualizing beginnings, here as they relate to the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2.\(^{19}\)

**NINE THESES on ACTS 2**

**Thesis 1: Function of Ancient History**

For ancient writers, the articulation of origins often had to do with the establishment of the *character* or *ethos* of a group, nation, city, person, etc. Luke is similarly interested in such originary moments. More importantly, he seems intensely concerned about specific kinds of beginnings—the ones that depict the Christian community of his narrative in an ideal light. Not only do the opening sections of Acts connect the Gospel and Acts, they also generate particular


\(^{19}\) The major bases for these theses stem from my work in Penner, *In Praise of Christian Origins* (particularly chs. 1, 3, and 5). For a summary of this work, see Penner, “Early Christian Heroes and Lukan Narrative.”
originary moments for the Christian community of Acts. As a result, the “birth” sequence of the incipient Christian community that Luke depicts becomes characterized in much the same way as the figure of Jesus does in the Lukan Gospel, where that birth is similarly distinguished by a particular potent beginning (signs, wonders, ecstatic speech). This focus on origins is not unique to early Christianity—it is a widespread interest that we find in Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources, from philosophical lives, to biographies of rulers, to histories of cities and peoples, to epic recounts of heroes. Obviously, this delineation does not begin to account for the complex function of the historical genre for Acts. There is also a critical element herein of connecting emergent Christianity to the Jewish tradition (which Luke already works hard to do in his Gospel). Under Roman imperial rule, such connections may have been pivotal for the survival of Christian narratives and communities. Given the privileges granted to Judaism, Luke may represent something of a “hidden transcript,” written with one meaning for outsiders and another for insiders. Whatever the case, fuller assessments of the historical nature and function of Acts will dramatically affect the way we read this text. Indeed, it will impact in fundamental ways what we can do with this text and how we can read it.

Thesis 2: Narrative Complexity

That said, we probably attribute too much individual significance to the various specific facets involved in the construction of these originary narrations. Ancient writers drew on a vast array of differing tropes, themes, and texts in their narrative enterprises. They often made conscious use of this material. But they were also steeped in a deep literary and cultural reservoir of images and compositional practices that often entailed drawing on material without always being intentional about it. The influence of literary criticism has not helped much here (and socio-rhetorical criticism has also misled on occasion). Our ideal author tends to become, in our hands, an unrealistic lens, as does, for that matter, the ideal audience. We often assume (even if unwittingly) that the ideal author and ideal audience coalesce together in a singular manner, such that we cannot help but always find a cohesive and consistent narrative. As a result, we run the risk of missing something of the complexity of writing and reading practices when we create these omniscient frames of reference and signification. Further, no one specific trait in the characterizing of the narrative community bears all that much significance in and of itself. We need to gain a greater appreciation for more general patterns, relying less on the unifying theological and

20. See further B. Kahl’s excellent analysis, “Acts of the Apostles: Pro(to)-Imperial Script and Hidden Transcript.” This accent on the Lukan agenda would have ramifications for the alleged “anti-Judaism” of the text. It may well be that the usurpation of Jewish tradition is about creating an appearance or perception for Roman authorities rather than representing an actual ideological position by the author vis-à-vis Judaism.
narrative tendencies we are wont to tease out in Luke-Acts with such seeming ease. In short, we probably need to do less “exegetical” work on a text like Acts 2 and more broadly comparative study. Further, our continued focusing on the minutiae of the text tends to reify the singular and unique nature of our findings, as well as continually confirming (I believe falsely) the distinctiveness of early Christian narrative and thought.

**Thesis 3: Multiplication of Textual Connections**

Modern readers have a strong desire to create unity—thematic, historical, cultural, social, textual, and political—in Luke-Acts (as a reflection of our general desire to create the same in the modern world—in that respect, creating a stable past becomes a means of stabilizing our own world in the midst of endless fragmentation, discontinuity, and accident). We manufacture coherence while producing textual interconnections throughout. Some of these no doubt are “intentional” (on the author’s part) and useful for us to ponder. Still, particularly with respect to this issue of beginnings in Acts, the question can be asked to what degree we are disproportionately magnifying Luke’s own commitment to, say, Pentecost as an originary moment by our reading, interweaving this event both backwards and forwards throughout the Lukan corpus. Going one step further, to what degree does our intercalation of the textuality of this narrative with other early Christian writings (Paul, Mark) and the Hebrew Scriptures (Joel, Psalms, Isaiah) also increase its plenitude of significance? Going back to a point raised above, it is quite possible that our overdetermination of the question of beginning and origin with respect to Acts 2 actually confirms its significance and importance precisely as such.

**Thesis 4: Overdetermination of Social and Cultural Meaning**

Historical and cultural intertexture is important in terms of creating broad contextual settings, not least for aiding in the construction of plausible narrative contexts. Pentecost functions as one such intertextual connection operative in Luke’s text. For a narrative setting to be persuasive as a form of rhetorical composition, such interlacing plays a crucial role. The outbreak of the spirit upon the assembled group may, however, have no palpable connection to the religious and cultural significance of Pentecost/Festival of Weeks in Jewish antiquity, and there is nothing redactional or literary that can really help us resolve this tension. If anything, Luke seems interested in the Festival of Weeks as a Jewish celebration pure and simple, thereby furthering his broad contextualizing of these early chapters in Jerusalem (and among Jews). Why should it mean anything beyond random context, beyond mere spectral spectacle? The danger is that we may be making much more of these historical and cultural intertextures than Luke may have. Luke is motivated much more by the functionality of these intertextures than by their precise and deeper historical and cultural significations. In short, we may often be reading way too much into various
aspects of Lukan narrative, assuming a high degree of authorial sophistication when in fact there could be less (in which case, we are the implied authors of the complex text we discover).  

**Thesis 5: Overdetermination of Scriptural Use**

The use of Hebrew Bible Scripture in Acts 2 interconnects story and speech throughout, tying in narrative structure with the poetics of recitation. As such, it is part of a broader Lukan use of “sacred texture.” It is, however, more *simulacra* than substance in terms of meaning; in other words, as with historical and cultural intertexts, the use of sacred texts may be more about the creation of character and the aura of power and authority than it is about Luke’s own intricate exegetical scholarship (we are the biblical scholars, not him!). Scholarship on Acts continues to find ever deeper levels of significance in terms of Luke’s use of Scripture, but I think it is time for a reassessment of this reading practice. The use of Scripture should rather be appreciated as part of a broader economy of discourses that are reflected throughout the text, functioning, more often than not, to sacralize principal moments in the narrative or to demonstrate oral performative excellence. Thus, for instance, while the citation from Joel in Acts 2 actually has some resonances with the surrounding narrative, the whole functions to imbue and energize this moment—originary or otherwise—as a potent evocation of “antiquity” in a moment of “newness.” Moreover, this use of sacred (and supernatural/magical!) intertexture heightens the exotic quality of the narrative much like the mention of Moses might in pagan magical spells. These ancient compositional practices, moreover, induce in us the desire to go deeper (historically, theologically, intertextually) into the matrix that Luke has generated (perhaps quite inadvertently and unintentionally). This could well be our own illusion of depth and coherence and linearity; still, our own modern need for beginnings is reconstituted in and through the narrative itself as a result, so that texts like Acts 2 are always affirmed as originary moments in one way or another.

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21. Peter’s speech, which follows in vv. 14–36, provides a good example of this: it is both connected to, and in some sense also detached from, the surrounding narrative context. The “proclamation” that is expressed on this occasion is less about substance and more about demonstrating that the apostles possess potent skills of public oral performance. We may create more depth in the intertextual underpinnings of this speech than Luke intended. The point is that the narrative audience is overwhelmingly persuaded, as many “repent and are baptized.” The outpouring of the spirit—the potent display of supernatural power—creates the context for Peter’s oral performance. The two are integrally related in that respect. The speech also draws upon the “event” by way of seeking to explain it. But primitive preaching this is not. Luke uses (or perhaps even develops) a particular kind of Christian discourse throughout, one which places Christians on the center stage in the public arena, speaking their “new” language and idioms. Luke is invested, I would argue, much less in the content of the speech than its performative quality: again, here, the character of the early community in its founding is the central motif, not the delineation of a coherent (either primitive or narrative) theology.

22. For example, C. A. Evans, “The Prophetic Setting of the Pentecost Sermon.”
another (even as we may deny that they are). Thus, we tend to reproduce in excess the Lukán rhetorical threads that align with ancient cultural tropes related to foundings and founding figures, all the while creating these threads in our own image, as looking in a well and seeing our own reflection staring back.

**Thesis 6: Dramatic Supernatural Focus of the Narrative**

Like many of the other features of this text, the manifestation of xenoglossy, which demonstrates the powerful nature of this “outpouring of the spirit,” functions to display the numinous power operative in this “birth” moment. Its connections to the “speaking in tongues” evident in Acts 10 appears more circumstantial. This is a motif that Luke uses, in divergent ways, to articulate his sense of the *inexpressible* nature of the power that is operative at critical junctures in the narrative. We have references to similar phenomena appearing in the Pauline communities, although here as well I am more intrigued by Paul’s use of this “experiential” trope (as social and cultural capital) to delineate the excessive supernatural expressions that seemingly are irrepressible in the communities with which he claims relationship in his letters. The supernatural manifestation of spiritual power demands a narrative expression. Luke may (and certainly need) know nothing of actual Christian experiences in this respect, and I am reticent to see here any intentional referentiality to historical experience. Still, the in-breaking of the spirit, evidenced in these displays of “speaking,” certainly energizes the Pentecost scene in Acts 2 with a powerful expressive quality. This sort of energetic and dramatic narrative has a striking visualizing effect, and we know from ancient rhetoric that such was intended to leave a powerful and lasting imprint on the sensations and the mentalité of the ancient and modern reader. I would also venture, somewhat tentatively, to see here some connection between the tremendous importance of oral performance in Acts more generally and the role of such narratives like Acts 2 in creating a sustained desire (in us) for shoring up the reality of the events described.

**Thesis 7: Visual Spectacle**

The table of nations, which follows in Acts 2:9–11, regardless of its source (why not an *ad hoc* Lukán creation?), functions like the other elements in the narrative. The intriguing suggestion that this “table” may link up with Roman imperial lists of conquered nations is worth pursuing, and any text written in the first and second centuries of the Roman Imperial era cannot help but have some imperial aspirations or, at the very least, traces of colonial mimicry.

23. For further discussion on some of these connections, see Penner, “‘In the Beginning’.”

24. Although somewhat conservative in his assessment, R. Strelan has given significant attention to the supernatural and “strange” nature of the Pentecost narrative. See his *Strange Acts*, 51–77 (esp. 68–77).

25. Now see the recent and incisive treatment of such matters by Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*. 
also seems invested in the kinds of historical intertextures such lists create. Still, we need to keep in mind that such lists were primarily experienced visually not literally. Hence, the visual environment of the author and readers might well be much more critical than any sort of literary influence we are wont to drum up. The imbuing of his narrative with such impressions of realia is critical in terms of achieving its persuasive ends, and the visual impressions herein are essential in that respect. Further, Luke has an apparent interest in cartography, related particularly to the expansion of the Christian movement. He likes to map, and this is an important part of the success of his narrative strategy, since, thereby, he maps his broad originary structure on to history itself. That this list might be “primitive” means little; as with any material artifact (if this is not a Lukan forgery), without provenance we can know very little. Still, I pause here for a moment to reflect on the strong impression scholarship has received that here in Acts 2 we do have some kind of non-Lukan list/material; that somehow within here lies a “sign” that will put us in touch with something “real,” something “early,” something “original,” something “pristine.” The impression that scholars have is noteworthy, and I wonder if this is not the intended effect of this list. The block of names and places, interjected into the narrative, certainly historicizes this moment (albeit with a tip of the hat to the visual rather than the literary) in a rather abrupt and concentrated way. If that were to be the case, then one would suspect that Luke in fact does want the reader to identify this Pentecost event as an originary moment (of some kind) in early Christianity, as a moment that is saturated with historical, cultural, and religious significance, even as the various components that go into producing that impression represent something of a spectacle. And that may in fact be the clue: the visual spectacle needs to be historically grounded in order to be convincing. It would be interesting to trace out in Acts the relationship of historicizing material in connection with displays of supernatural and apostolic power. I suspect there is a strong correlation. Thus, even as modern “critical” scholars are quite willing to eschew the miraculous, it may well be precisely such narrative events that create the desire for a modern historical reification of transcendental display.

**Thesis 8: Scripts of Power**

Luke’s story of the Pentecost event is infused with a compelling and spirited interest in power—here numinous and oral. This “birthing”—if we want to call it that—is profoundly grounded in rather grand performances—by Jesus (the

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26. See especially the groundbreaking work of D. C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered* (esp. 97–100). If we take her application of visibility in terms of how it relates to Paul’s letters and redeploy that for Acts, we would find that our inferences based on a tradition steeped in literary traditions has caused us to miss essential aspects of visual display and spectacle in Acts (particularly as those link up with Roman imperial visual display).
outpouring of the spirit), the assembled group (speaking and hearing other languages), Peter (who speaks with authority), the spectators (who conven en masse), and perhaps even the “guest” prophet of old, Joel (who is intertexted into the scene as the one who predicted that this event would, someday, take place). These potent displays are evident throughout Acts, and, while I do not want to make much of their interconnections on a micro level, on a macro plane they attest to Luke’s attraction to broader cultural patterns of authority and control. In the Lukan economy of discourses, then, beginningness not only permeates his two volume work, but, at every turn, it is infused with highly charged cultural scripts of power. No doubt, this is one of the reasons we find Luke’s narrative so attractive and compelling. In the world of bio-power, where structures of power-relations are integral to the essential operations of our social constructions of—and interactions in—the world, a narrative like Acts 2, with its heavy-handed accent on divine authority, counter to and in mimicry of that of imperial authority, resolutely fixes our attention on this story.

**Thesis 9: Toward the End of the Beginning**

In so far as we continue to use the methods of inquiry that we do, and in so far as we persist in discursively constructing beginningness in the kinds of questions we ask of the early Christian texts, we will never escape the eternal return of the canonical originary moments of early Christian history. No doubt we will frequently convince ourselves that we have eluded them. But without learning to read differently and divergently—without deconstructing our modern, critical scholarly engrained reading strategies that continually (re)produce beginningness as they reproduce in excess the Lukian originary—we will repeatedly find ourselves within the constraints of the old paradigms and models. The study of Christian origins is in need of a new birth, one which begins to appreciate the profound impact that modern and modernist cultural practices and historical developments have had on our ways of seeing, reading, and being. What is finally needed, then, is a new disciplining of questions and methods, which will lead to new kinds of performativities, that will, in the end, help us appreciate more fully why it is that we have never been able—in the past 2000 years!—to elude the Lukian grip on our historical imaginations.

Herein lies the rub: in so far as we think in terms of “beginnings” and “origins” we are going to continually find “beginnings” and “origins.” The critical question, it seems to me, is how we begin to think of an early Christianity without either. I believe this is possible. And, I would argue, it is also necessary. In other words, to ask the question “did Christianity begin with Pentecost” is to redirect attention away from more pressing questions in the study of the past in relation to our present. In some respects, one might argue that the illusion of beginnings allows us, in our world, to continue to reify notions of causality, which may in fact be a way of abdicating political and social responsibility for
our world. The real issue, I would suggest, is assessing precisely what kinds of present social relationships we might be configuring in and through our quest for an ancient past (particularly in the way we normally undertake that quest). Ultimately, what is at stake in these figurations and significations? And, more importantly, what is lost? And why are we losing ourselves in this ancient past to begin with? Is it because when there is no perceivable future seeking an originary moment is either a way to forget or a means by which to find hope? In the end, we might find a much deeper creative and political power in the Lukan narratives—perhaps one that could potentially change our own worlds and ways of being, potentially in radical ways—if we turn our attention away from beginnings. The quest for a beginning is a dead-end, I believe. Christianity did not begin with Pentecost largely because, in point of fact, Christianity did not begin at all. Indeed, instead of asking “did Christianity begin with x or y or z” we might do well to locate and examine our own desires for origins, asking why we want or need Christianity to have started with the pouring out of the spirit at Pentecost, with the words of Jesus or the letters of Paul, with the preaching of John the Baptist, or with the church history of Eusebius, or wherever we happen to situate such beginnings. The ends of doing away with a search for a beginning, I would argue, are far more useful for renegotiating social relationships in our present. Our interpretations of and investigations into Acts 2 and its role in the formation of early Christianity can (and should!) in fact teach us something about ourselves and our relationship to this world (and each other). Therein I believe self-reflective study on early Christian texts, in terms of a civic and social enterprise, is still necessary and productive.

27. For a discussion of the “abdication of responsibility” in scholarly interpretation and method, see D. C. Lopez, “Visualizing Significant Otherness.”

WORKS CITED


“13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”
PAUL AND THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

Arthur J. Dewey

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.¹

The QUESTION of ORIGINS

Let me be blunt. Was Paul the founder of Christianity? Can we lay at his feet not only our virtual cloaks (Acts 7:58) but also the responsibility for launching the Christian ship onto the waters of history? Was he the one who saw “a good thing” when it arrived? Was it his theological acumen that helped usher in a new religion?

Throughout the centuries Paul has been both endorsed and abused for creating the Christian religion. Those who praised him saw the Pauline evidence as marking the seismic shift of the Jesus Movement away from its Jewish matrix. But others would see the same material as Paul’s treacherous step, lurching away from his people.

Paul’s reputation accordingly is kaleidoscopic. Twist the evidence one way and he is Christianity’s “main man.” Christian theology, in fact, looks much like marginal notes on the Pauline Letters (PL). Twist it again and he is the apologist par excellence for the sovereignty of Christianity. Yet again, and he was a first century confidence man, as Kazantzakis portrayed. Nietzsche railed against the “dysangelist.” Buber argued that Paul replaced the relational trust Jesus had towards God for the propositional instrumentality of faith. Not only Jews have wondered if Paul was not a disturbed Pharisee who had a problem with his roots.

Such assessments of Paul and his role in the Christian story have been based largely on anachronistic readings of the extant evidence. It is crucial that we begin to layer the pertinent material along chronological lines.\(^2\) If we do so, then we begin to discover Paul in a very different light. But this very reconsideration will bring its own problematic. If it turns out that Paul had no intention of starting a new religion, then what was he doing?

The EVIDENCE

Any analysis of the question of Paul and the origins of Christianity must begin with the Acts of the Apostles. Traditionally this has been a *sine qua non* for an historical assessment of Paul. But this can no longer be a starting point for an historical investigation of Paul; rather, it is actually an occasion to clear away some of the non-evidentiary material. The Acts Seminar recently has gone on record, judging that Acts is an early second century document.\(^3\) It would be inappropriate, therefore, to use Acts in any certain and unqualified way to lay the foundation for what the historical Paul was doing. Indeed, the character of Paul in Acts not only is quite distinct from the writer of the Pauline Letters, but even serves as a rehabilitated figure for the concerns of developing second century community reflected in Acts. The character of Paul in Acts counters the “Apostle” of Marcion; remains in harmony with and subordinate to the Twelve Apostles, thereby contradicting those free-wheeling “Gnostic” groups; and tries to stay at peace with the imperial authorities. The Paul of Acts is a very effective advance man for the developing second century institution.

The Pastorals (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus) also can be dated to the early to mid-second century.\(^4\) It is here we meet the figure of the institutional Paul. These pseudonymous writings attempt to answer the issues and practices of Asia Minor in the second century; not the least of which was the intent to replace the equality and full functioning of women in the assemblies with the old cultural order of subjection. These letters deliver a typology of control for the leading males to imitate. The apocalyptic thunder has long since rumbled away. Now

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2. We must beware of falling into the trap of an unwitting Paulo-centrism that has dogged much of the Christian tradition. Yet NT scholarship has demonstrated dramatically the pluralism within the early Jesus movement of the first century. Nor should we avoid the likelihood that Paul was not idiosyncratic but may well be symptomatic of the universal trends of first-century Judaism. We should also concern ourselves with the danger of a linear metaphor (“chronological lines”). Despite the call for diversity within the Christian tradition there still seems to be an assumption of linearity in its development. A more complicated re-imagining most likely will be required to come to terms with the questions of origins. How are we to imagine the multilayered complexity of the early Jesus traditions? How are we to note how some elements were re-selected and used in a variety of different ways and practices in subsequent generations?

3. See the Acts Seminar Papers Fall 05 as well as the Seminar Vote.

4. See the excellent work of Dennis MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle.*
there is only the matter of maintaining the organization's structure according to the virtues of the Roman world.

Finally, we need to note that both Ephesians and Colossians do not help us determine directly what Paul was about. Written in the 80s or 90s of the first century, these letters already indicate social situations quite different from the Pauline Letters. As will be shortly noted, these letters describe a community that has been reconfigured along certain mythic lines. Such language suggests a social situation somewhat removed from what was described in any of the Pauline correspondence. Thus, the best that we can learn from this evidence are the possible lines of trajectory that may have come originally from Paul's thought. Yet their language indicates that later concerns have significantly re-orientated the momentum.

We are thus left with the Pauline Letters. From these must come any answer to the question of Paul's relation to the founding of Christianity.

SOCIAL-HISTORICAL-HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The question of origins is quite problematical. What do we mean by “origins”? Does it mean the first, the original? Does it point to the moment of origination? Are we talking about the source of a movement or practice? Or, is it the constellation that distinguishes something from its competition; a distinctive voice over against the surrounding sound? Are we talking about an historical particularity?

These questions are telling when we raise the issue of Paul and Christian origins. We have the advantage and disadvantage of 20/20 hindsight. We often presume that what has developed was initially intended. But that is an organic presumption. In fact, it is a pale residue of the argument for the divine institution and uniqueness of the church. In this light, Paul has become the guarantor of the new organization. But, as mentioned above, that is a second century concern.

There is also the residual effect of the great man complex/syndrome. This nineteenth-century construction, focusing on the heroic genius of Paul, misses the social situation of the Pauline Letters. Paul's performance, his sense of relationship and the social reality are greatly collapsed and reduced under that “great man” perspective.

It is certainly the case that subsequent tradition has focused on some of the elements in the Paul Letters. These are the elements that enabled later political,

5. 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans.
6. This is quite similar to the issues faced at the start of the Jesus Seminar. We finally attempted to detect the distinctive voice of Jesus. A very helpful essay on this is by S. Stowers, “Mythmaking, Social Formation, and Varieties of Social Theory.”
7. In that sense the Romantic influence has taken over the Apologetic task.
historical realities to grow. This has meant that what was Paul’s perspective or construction may well have been lost or dramatically revised in that selective appropriation. Even the collections of Letters of Paul that circulated by the end of the first century suggest such a revised understanding of Paul. The Letters have shifted from ephemera to near-canonical status. The writer of the Letters has become in this context an authoritative voice. Could it be, furthermore, that Marcion was both right and wrong? Was Marcion, the construction man, who built a community out of the Pauline debris (as well as the anti-Judaic trends), a sensitive listener of Paul or has he already revised (and deformed) Paul’s agenda?

Such points remind us of the dangers of misinterpretation. As we move away from the concerns of the second century and attempt to catch some whiff of the mid-first-century atmosphere, what happens? Even here readers of Paul often fill in the empty space with anachronistic furniture, but have no sense of Paul’s imagination; his use of metaphors, and space, and relationship. Nor is there always some inkling that there were different social issues afoot.

Part of this misinterpretation comes by overlooking the loss of the apocalyptic voice. Indeed, the lingering question may well be: how long can you ride the earthquake? How can the tremor continue to run? The post-70 CE work of Mark did not last. Both Matthew and Luke strenuously revised this. The threnody of discontinuity was overtaken by those choruses chanting continuity.

The fall of Jerusalem brought a brake to the pluralism and universalizing momentum of first-century Judaism. It did not stop matters altogether. But it did put a crimp in the efforts of Philo et al. who were forging the Hellenistic Diaspora. The disaster of 132–135 CE finished the apocalyptic scenario and the attempt at radical revolution and transformation. Simultaneously the economic engine of the Empire was also changing. The economic upswing of the mid- to late-first century was morphing into a different state of affairs by the mid-second century. Things were slowing down. This was a time of consolidation

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8. As we shall point out below, was his relational, anti-imperial position lost in the wake of history? Indeed, after considering Paul’s response to his various opponents, we can make a strong case that, within a generation or two after his death (and certainly in the ensuing centuries) Paul’s opponents have won the day. A radical non-elitist position, that would break through lines of social distinction and advantage others, has never been the predominant policy of the ongoing tradition.

9. Stowers (“Mythmaking,” 493) has called this exaptation, the social equivalent of Darwinian adaptation. What once had little or no function in an earlier environment or population finds a new or different function in a later environment or population.

10. What are we, for example, to make of Paul’s use and transcendence of the Syrian communities’ hero ideology? Paul’s God-sense pushes this; his insight into God’s surprise radically redraws the social hero image; he does not reinforce this.

11. Thomas Jefferson’s “eternal revolution” would be in this camp. Marcion seems to have felt this loss and took editorial steps to redirect the tradition. Apocalyptic language must be situated within social reality and the pressures which threaten and deform social patterns.
and monumentalizing. It was also a time for border building and maintenance. The Coliseum was built from the spoils of Jerusalem. The Wall of Hadrian goes beyond the Column of Trajan and the Arch of Titus.

In the pre-70 CE world what was happening? Jonathan Z. Smith has pointed out that there was a considerable movement underway with various groups seeking a social solution to the continuing demands of the Empire. In sum there was a move away from the temples to associations and grass-roots organizations. Merrill Miller puts it quite nicely:

What was at stake were the changing forms of collective identity in which the claims of the past and the situations of the present were not always easy to negotiate. The Jesus people in Antioch and elsewhere, like the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and elsewhere, however differently situated, were among the emerging associations that looked to homeland and ancestral traditions, while adapting to the cosmopolitan environment of the empire in order to redefine traditional collective identities.12

The horizontal need for belonging outdistanced the vertical cult world.13 Sacred space was on the move from temple to a more modest gathering place.14

At the same time there were definite attempts to imagine the world in utopian or cosmopolitan ways. Certainly the Roman Empire was built upon the Alexandrian dream of a “civilized world.”15 John White has pointed out how the Romans maintained the fiction of an Empire by utilizing the deep metaphors of family along utopian lines.16 One cannot read Philo without coming to grips with the universal thrust of the Jewish mission. Dieter Georgi has led the way in writing about this movement that was both geographically vast and ideologically nuanced.17 Further, Daniel Boyarin and Arthur Dewey have located Paul among those first-century thinkers concerned with the far-ranging implications of their vision. Boyarin sees Paul as a Jew concerned with the question of a universal identity. Dewey points out that this thinking is quite related not only to the intellectual debate of the first century but also to the choice of rhetorical tropes.18

13. The use of apocalyptic language in the service of this horizontal tendency has been greatly overlooked. In effect, such language helps demolish the “pillared” world for the benefit of those who are not the usual recipients of the benefits of that society.
14. This social demand for belonging of the first century comes forward in the second century in terms of education and social care. For more on the movement away from the Temple see J. Z. Smith, “The Temple and the Magician,” in Map Is Not Territory, 172–89.
It is thus incumbent upon our investigation to place Paul not within the orbit of second-century politics but among those who were attempting to forge new alliances and structures within an Empire that was both riding an economic momentum and exacting enormous pressure upon 85% of the population. This was a world where Judaism was lived out in a variety of ways. The destruction of the Temple was not yet a fissure in the social memory. Social experiment—not consolidation and canonization—was uppermost. It was a time when translocal links among voluntary associations were being established. But, if such groups began to develop a significant trans-city organization they might be perceived as a threat to the imperial government.

**SATELLITE PHOTOGRAPHY**

Word studies can be both helpful and misleading. While they are helpful in reconnoitering the evidence’s rhetorical level and social-historical situation, such studies can remain aloof and, at times, subservient to some overarching ideology.

The use of *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) in the Pauline correspondence thus must be seen simply as an entry point into the investigation. It helps see some of the limits of Paul’s scope. But it does not resolve the question of origins.

**Specific Community/Communities**

In the PL the use of *ekklesia* refers in most instances to a specific community or communities. Thus, the specific noun meaning a community: 1 Cor 1:1, 2; 6:4; 10:32; 11:18; 14:5; 14:19; 14:23; 14:28; 16:19; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 4:15; 1 Thess 1:1. Phlm 1:2; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 14:4 (could also be generalizing); plural, with respect to specific communities: Rom 16:4 (all the assemblies); 16:16 (all); 1 Cor 11:16; 1 Cor 16:19 (all communities of Asia); 1 Cor 7:17 (rule in all the communities, specific); 1 Cor 16:1 (communities of Galatia); 2 Cor 8:1 (communities of Macedonia); Gal 1:2 (communities of Galatia); 1:22 (communities in Judea, probably secondary).

In the non PL we also have a few instances: (sing.) Col 4:15; 4:16; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 5:16 (could also be institutional rule); (plural) 2 Thess 1:4 (general).

**Institutional Speech**

In three instances in PL we have *ekklesia* involved in the language of community rules: 1 Cor 14:33, 34, 35. The language is a directive, attempting to

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19. For more on the socio-economic issues see D. Georgi, “Socioeconomic Reasons for the ‘Divine Man’ as a Propagandistic Pattern.”

20. For more see R. S. Ascough, “Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity.” Thus, trade unions or cult associations were examples of such translocal groups. Ascough argues that the early Jesus congregations were essentially local groups with limited translocal connections.

order the community. This material is found in a passage many would regard as secondary. Indeed, this language reflects that found in 1 Tim 3:5, 15 where behavior is a major concern. As noted above, the Pastorals come from a later time. Thus, 1 Cor 14:33b–36 probably was a second century insertion and directly helpful in our investigation of Paul.

Mythic Formulation

It is only in the later letter of Ephesians and Colossians that the term ekklesia takes on a decidedly mythic cast. Ephesians (1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32) presumes a hierarchical, cosmic image of the Body of the Anointed, as the ekklesia. Colossians 1:24 also takes this as a starting point. In fact, in Ephesians this hierarchical understanding allows for a resumption of gender distinction and subordination of women.

PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES

“Persecuting the ekklesia of God”

There are three instances where Paul uses the term ekklesia in what seems a more universal sense (not limited to specific community/ies).

Gal 1:13

12I say this because it was not transmitted to me by anyone nor did anyone teach it to me. Rather, it came to me as an insight from God about Jesus as God’s Anointed. 13Surely you’ve heard of my own behavior as a practicing Jew, how aggressively I harassed God’s new community (ekklesia), trying to wipe it out. 14I went way beyond most of my contemporaries in my observance of Judaism, and became notably zealous about my ancestral traditions. 15However, when the One who designated me before I was born and commissioned me to be an envoy, surprising all human expectations, chose to make his son known through me with the intent that I would proclaim God’s world-transforming news to “the nations,” I did not rush off to consult with anyone. (SV)

1 Cor 15:9

8Last of all, as to one in whose birth God’s purpose seemed to have miscarried, he was seen by me as well. 9For I am the least worthy of the envoys; I do not deserve to be called an envoy because I tried to put the community of the Anointed (ekklesia) out of business. 10But the generous favor of God has made me what I am, and God’s generosity to me has not been wasted. (SV)

Phi 3:6

6My zeal about this led me to persecute the Anointed’s people (ekklesia). In regard to the requirements of the Law, I was flawless. 7But all of these things that I once thought were valuable assets I have come to regard as worthless because of God’s Anointed. (SV)

Could Paul be referring to that community which he had harassed before he had his breakthrough experience? While this may be a possibility (particularly
in Gal); it does seem that Paul refers to a larger community. Does this signal an understanding of a universal church? A new religion? What would “assembly of God” mean in the late 30s–early 40s? Is this an instance of a translocal association?

We must note that each use is embedded in the language of religious competition, a hallmark of the first century. In Galatians “God’s community” is a term of honor; in contrast to the regard Paul once had of that aberrant Jewish community. For Paul this title plays greatly in his argument to the Galatian communities. He wants to establish the point that Gentile followers of Jesus are on equal terms with the Jewish followers. Paul is convinced that there is a new situation (Gal 6:15), a new ktisis (foundation or world).22 The question is whether Paul understood this new situation as the emergence of a new religion, radically distinct from mid-first-century Judaism.23

In 1 Cor 15:9 we are still embedded in the language of religious competition.24 Here Paul is recounting a list of visionary witnesses to the post mortem visions of the Anointed. The same can be said of Phil 3:6. It should be pointed out that Paul sees such religious language of competition as part of the attempt to gain some advantage over others. Such a position Paul considers a fundamental misunderstanding (the attempt to boast) of how one should respond to what God has done in regard to the Anointed.25

22. The use of dreams and visions was often employed to establish the cult of a god in a new area. See Ascough, “Translocal Relationships” 232–33. The use of initiatory practices also embodied this process of divine adoption. But Paul’s notion of a new foundation needs to be seen over against the imperial “founding” of cities in the empire.

23. A. Segal (Rebecca’s Children, 107) would comment on the underlying experience of Paul. “So he did not have the most radical kind of conversion. He decided against following his previous sect of Pharisaism in favor of a new sect of Judaism that he previously regarded as heretical.” While I dispute even the use of the term “conversion” as misleading, Segal is correct in pointing out that Paul is not engaging in constructing a new religion. However, one still has to ask: Did Paul see the conditions of human life radically altered for all? Of course, one has to consider the historical and rhetorical situation of Galatians. Paul is making the case that these gentiles are on equal footing with Jesus Jewish believers. But Paul might well be using an older situation to argue a newer one. The material he uses from the table fellowship situation in Antioch may be greatly deflected. The relationship with Jerusalem in regard to the Galatian situation, for example, may be significantly different or changed from what was the influence of Jerusalem (if any) upon the Antiochene community. Paul’s focus on Cephas may also reflect a development after the Antiochene “incident” as well as an element in his argument to the Galatians. For a nuanced reading of this see M. Miller, “Antioch, Paul, and Jerusalem.”

24. Here M. Miller (“Antioch, Paul, and Jerusalem,” 228–34) has pointed out that Paul’s citation of the kerygma and vision tradition may well have originally developed for a Hellenistic Jewish audience in Antioch (following B. Mack). But in 1 Corinthians he is now transferring this to a new situation in Corinth.

25. If one follows up with Paul’s thinking in Phil 3:18–21, one can begin to detect a major direction in his understanding. He is not interested in constructing a lasting organization; rather, he sees the possibility of transforming those who are abased in the Empire into a new condition.

18 As I have told you often before and tell you again now with great sadness, many have adopted a way of life that is opposed to everything the cross of the
“The Body of the Anointed” 1 Cor 12:4–30

In striking contrast to the mythic, cosmic and hierarchical sense of “body” in Ephesians and Colossians, the use of “body” in 1 Corinthians 12 demonstrates Paul’s very different sense of what “community” entails.

1There are different gifts, but the same power of God, 5and there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord, 6and there are different activities, but the same God makes them all effective in everyone. 7Some expression of God’s power is given to each of us for the benefit of all. 8The ability to speak wisely is given to one through God’s power, the ability to speak knowledgeably to another in accordance with the same divine power, 9to another deeds of faith by the same divine power, to another gifts of healing by the one divine power, 10to another the ability to do powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish the gifts that are inspired by God’s power from those that are not, to another different forms of ecstatic speech, to another the ability to interpret ecstatic speech. 11One and the same power of God makes all of these effective and assigns them to each person individually as God pleases.

12Just as the body has many parts and all of the parts, even though there are many of them, are still parts of one body, so is the body of the Anointed. 13For we were all baptized by the same power of God into one body, whether we were Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all invited to imbibe the same divine power. 14The body does not consist of only one part, but of many. 15If the foot were to say, “Because I’m not a hand, I’m not part of the body,” that’s no reason to suppose that it’s not part of the body, is it? 16And if the ear were to say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not part of the body,” that’s no reason for thinking it isn’t part of the body, is it? 17If the whole body consisted of an eye, how would it hear? And if the whole were an ear, how would it be able to smell anything? 18But in fact God has put each of the parts in the body to accomplish what God intended. 19If everything consisted of just one part, there would be no body, would there? 20But the fact is, although there are many parts, there is one body. 21It’s just not possible for the eye to say to the hand, “I have no need of you;” or for the head to say to the feet, “I have no use for you.” 22But in many respects the parts of the body that seem to be less important are the most necessary, 23and

Anointed stands for. 18They are heading for destruction. Their god is the belly and they take pride in their shameful behavior. They have their minds set on a merely earthly existence. 20The commonwealth to which we belong, on the other hand, is in heaven, from where we are expecting the one who will deliver us, our lord, Jesus the Anointed. 21He will transform our weak and mortal body into a body as glorious as his, by the power he has to make everything subject to his will. (SV) (ἀνεματοχηματισε το σώμα της τοπαινωσιως ημων συμμορφον τω σώματι της δόξης αυτω κατά την ένεργειαν του δυνασθαι αυτων και υποτάξαι αυτω τα παντα.)

Ταπεινωσις denotes more than a sense of humility; far more than a “spiritual state” or of simply being emotionally “downcast.” Social subjection is its meaning. In fact, the basic metaphor is based upon the physical act of lowering the eyes, the physical lowering of the head, before a superior. The opposite is to be exalted, lifted up; the head (and one’s gaze) is raised—perhaps by another? It implies a condition in which one can be “proud.” I would contend that such language by Paul intimates an alternative social vision.
the parts of the body that we think are undignified we treat with more respect, and we clothe our private parts with a greater degree of propriety 24 than our more presentable parts require. But God unified the body by giving the inferior part greater value, 25 so that there would be no division in the body, but that the parts would care about each other. 26 If one part is in pain, all parts suffer; if one part is honored, all parts celebrate.

27 All of you together are the body of the Anointed and individually you are members of it. 28 And God has made some appointments in the community of the Anointed: first envoys, second prophets, third teachers, then those who work wonders, then those who know how to heal, helpers, administrators, and those who can speak in various kinds of ecstatic utterance. 29 Are all envoys? Is everyone a prophet? Are all teachers? Are all wonder-workers? Are all healers? 30 Do all engage in ecstatic speech? Does everyone interpret? But I urge you to aspire to the more important gifts. And I can point out a way that is even more excellent than having any of these gifts. (SV)

It should be noted straightway that this extended metaphor does not have “a head,” that is, there is no concern to structure the image in hierarchical terms, so that the “head of the body” is the Anointed (as in Ephesians and Colossians). On the contrary, the body in 1 Corinthians is “headless” in that regard. Of course, there are parts of the head involved (an eye, an ear), but there is no cephalic override. Instead, Paul takes a page from Roman political discussion (over the public good) and turns this into a comic performance, where the various parts have to come to terms with one another (literally are given comic voices through the use of personification). His point is not that some parts have an advantage over others but that each contributes to the good of the whole. The Anointed is not found in some part but all are parts of the body of the Anointed. For Paul the historical community of Corinth, in all its diversity, celebrates through their living together the presence of the Anointed. There is no mythical figure of cosmic proportions.

The “Conversion” of Paul?

One of the major arguments connecting Paul with the origin of Christianity is his so-called conversion. Many assume that Paul has joined a social reality either which already has distanced itself from Israel or, more likely, Paul will push in that separate direction. In that fashion, the relation of his conversion sets a new scene for subsequent generations.

The genius of Paul is to reflect on his conversion experience in such a way as to make it a new model for the whole community. In doing so, he develops a new principle of salvation in Christianity, for both Jews and Gentiles. The principle of salvation is the same as the principle of community: conversion through baptism in Christ.

Drawing on his own experience, Paul says that everyone needs radically to reorient his or her way of thinking in order to become a Christian. As a result, the conversion model operates for both Jews and Gentiles in a new social entity which reflects
the house church of Pauline Christianity. . . . this reorientation of life after so radical a decision fits the principles of social psychology.  

Evidently Paul leaves a legacy: he becomes a model for Gentile Christianity in subsequent generations. Yet is this actually the case? Certainly one can argue that both Acts and the Pastorals present a mimetic typology for second-century believers. The outstanding question is whether Paul intended this.

In my paper “The Masks of Paul,” I argued that the focus on the conversion of Paul is wrongheaded. It transforms the historical Paul, the actor, into Paul the character, a study for imitation and authoritative justification. This neglects from the outset the script of Paul. We overlook in our historical hindsight—or is it blind sight—that Paul is constructing not just an argument but relationships with his speech. We fail to notice the strategy of his speech performance. I contended that it is not a matter of detecting Paul’s “conversion” as of perceiving how he plays his creative role in communicating the power of God’s world-transforming message (e.g., 2 Cor 5:11–21). Paul replayed the work of the cynics with his diatribal elements, attempting to encounter his audience—by using personifications—to get his audience to see their condition (e.g., Rom 7:7–25). He does this not to demand replication but to empower, transmitting God’s world-transforming message, the revelation, the breakthrough, the light. Such an argument places emphasis upon the performative practice of Paul. He does so not to be copied but to communicate.

A rhetorical analysis on the Pauline material should cause the modern reader pause. The notion of conversion has been quickly applied all too often to material that may well be doing more than simply reporting or indirectly touching on Paul’s conversion.

If we begin with Gal 1:15–16 we can see that Paul sees his experience in prophetic terms. He is not joining or constructing a new religion. Instead, he sees himself along the lines of the prophets of old.

It has often been pointed out that 1 Cor 9:1 quite likely refers to Paul’s visionary experience (“I have seen Jesus our Lord, haven’t I?”). In 1 Cor 9:1a Paul could well be a cynic teacher, indicating his roles as a free person and emissary. But we can also see that these rhetorical questions are part of the larger issue. It is actually a question of Paul’s relationship to the Corinthians that is at stake. Paul’s vision of the Lord is put in play here for the sake of legitimating his relationship with the community. This is not unlike the underlying logic in Gal 1:16 where his revelation is a prophetic call to the subhuman (i.e., the Gentiles).

26. A. Segal, Rebecca’s Children, 110, 114.
28. Such a position is typical of someone in an association trying to connect the particular association with a long-standing past, here the prophets of old. This continues in the use of the iconic figure of Abraham.
In 1 Cor 15:1ff. Paul enumerates traditions that he has received in order to make his case over the question of meaningfulness of a future resurrection. In 1 Cor 15:3 he begins with an appearance listing. It is crucial to see that in a list that would speak honorably of those who had such revelatory experience Paul characterizes himself as “one in whose birth God’s purpose seemed to have miscarried” (SV). He is an “envoy” in spite of himself. He has a role to play that is solely God’s doing. Indeed, the Greek even underscores that “I am what I am” through the favor of God (v.10). Paul’s role (ὁ εἰμι, cf. Gal 2:20) is contingent upon the divine intrusion. While this may allude to Gal 1:15–16, it also plays with the personification of living out of the new character of the Anointed (Gal 2:19–21).

The fool’s speech (2 Cor 11:1–12:13) in one of fragments collected as 2 Corinthians must be seen first of all in its dramatic light. Paul has already mimed roles of a disappointed matchmaker (11:2–6), and a thief (11:7–11), and now begins to “boast” like those who “disguise” themselves in the role of “apostles” (11:13). He notes that, while he was not overbearing in his performance, the Corinthians were taken in by those actors who dominated them. So, he takes up their game, their script. Of course, since this is a fool’s speech Paul is parodying such qualities. Paul does not simply report his past. He places it within a dramatic scenario along with comic script. Even a revelation to Paul does not receive any special treatment. Instead, Paul uses his revelatory experience as a dramatic conclusion to his ongoing parody. Such a comic frame inverts the honorable position for such experiences. This revelation does not have to be the one that galvanized Paul for his mission (Gal 1:15–16). Indeed, Paul gives the game away in 12:19. Paul makes it clear why he writes—for the Corinthians’ growth and development as a community. He uses himself as the butt of jokes so that the community might discover themselves. By taking the charge of unverified boasting and carrying it to comic extremes Paul forces his listeners to see the issue of competence in a dramatic light and to re-examine the basis of their social assumptions and judgments through this role-playing.

Philippians 3:2–43 would appear at first blush to be a prime example of Paul’s conversion perspective. But this material has a definite script. Paul is delivering a last will and testament. He sets in dramatic relief opposing sides (typical of farewell material). Then Paul brings up his past in order to show how he has dropped those roles for a new one. Moreover, this new role playing can be done by his audience who are exhorted to join in the acting. This is not a simple report of a conversion experience. Rather, it is an envisioned drama that would go far beyond the original performance of the letter. The latter per-

29. χάριτι δὲ θεοῦ εἰμι ὁ εἰμι.
30. For more of the dramatic use of “ego” and “ho (ὁ)” see Dewey, Spirit and Letter in Paul, 14, n. 34.
formance will “work” if the audience has been persuaded to take up the mythic and athletic masks Paul has suggested.

In the section of Romans, where Paul explores the relationship of Israel within the new conditions brought about by the divine action in the Anointed, Paul begins with a most astonishing declaration. He would become a social outcast for the sake of his people.31

It is crucial to see that Paul refuses to give up on his relationship to the Anointed (9:1) as well as his relationship with his people (9:3). He places himself in an ambiguous social situation by doggedly refraining from choosing one over the other. Romans 9–11 is a tortured experiment in the search for wisdom in the midst of this social and religious turmoil. What is capital for our discussion is that this passage does throw other Pauline passages into a contrasting light. Paul’s stubborn refusal here seems to run counter to other passages that would suggest that Paul had left his former life behind. In fact, this moving dialectic in Rom 9–11 carries on within the ever widening perspective Paul is working out in his cosmic reframing of human existence.32

The question of conversion often leads to a psychological study or an emphasis upon the individual genius. But are these not modern obsessions? What if we want to see Paul as convert so as to understand the origins of Christianity within our modern categories? But this certainly begs the question. We need to ask from our brief analysis of the Pauline material:

- Why does Paul mock his own vision?
- Why does he use different characters/personae?
- Does the texture of the evidence give us a clue to this?
- If Paul is using diatribe, mime, then what should we think?
- What is the purpose of these performances?
- Are these indications of a rhetorical mask?

Additionally we must not overlook Arthur D. Nock’s point that the question of “conversion” occurs within the hopes and disappointments of the Empire.33 I would suggest that Paul’s language reinforces this. As mentioned above,

32. Paul provides an attempt to work out what being human means in these translocal communities (ch. 8). Furthermore, Paul’s dilemma, his refusal to give up on either his ethnic roots or his transformative (prophetic) experience, is the personal aspect of the social problem that has come about with the emergence of these gentle Jesus associations vis-à-vis the social reality of Hellenistic Judaism. Romans 9–11 is literally the tip of the social iceberg. The question of who are Paul’s primary audience in Romans is enormous here. At the same time, the utopian vision of Paul, coupled with the imperial context, help produce a multilayered scenario. Yet, despite Paul’s utopian vision there is no hint that he is intent of constructing an institution, a social entity that would displace or erase Israel.
33. A. D. Nock, Conversion, 7.
Boyarín has also made a strong case for Paul’s cultural reach. But there is further issue and that is the fact of making such declarations with the Empire itself. One can easily talk of conversion without any reference to the political reality of the time. Yet, this seems an implausible scenario with Paul.

A further issue that never sees the light of discussion is the possibility that Paul’s revelatory experience was not solitary affair. Precisely because of the psychological model of William James there is a constant emphasis upon the individual’s experience and movement from dark to light, from internal division to internal unity. Yet, there is nothing in Gal 1:15–16 to argue that this took place in private. When Paul mentions “revelation” again (Gal 2:2) it could well be read as a communal experience and commissioning. Could Gal 1:15–16 also be located within a communal setting and experience? The basic reason for dismissing such a proposal is the material from Acts. But that cannot be credited.

We should also not forget that, if Paul is an intellectual heir to the conflicting currents of the Greco-Roman world, then he is expressing not a simple personal construction. Paul may well be symptomatic of the shifting waves of cultural debate. Perhaps we should reread Euripides Bacchae. What if we were to read Paul from within the mask? By this I mean, what if we were to finally acknowledge the kind of language game Paul is playing. What if he sees himself as someone who is delivering the revelation of the divine to all?

We know that even Dionysus was domesticated in the play. And Paul by the second century was rendered safe and housebroken. The point is that Paul did not set himself up as a model for subsequent generations to follow; rather, he performed in various masks and challenged his listeners to take up such performances—not to be like him but to exercise the liberty that they all shared in the Anointed.

**WHAT WAS PAUL DOING?**

If we begin with Paul’s words we can note that a visionary experience (Gal 1:1, 11–12, 15–16) provided a new understanding of the God of Israel. He does not discover a new god; rather, he sees that the God of Israel is acting in a new

34. For the role of William James in the establishment of the model for conversion see my paper on the “Masks of Paul,” 165–67.
35. We should not overlook a clue in 1 Cor 14:23–25. Paul may be replaying his experience of discovering God in an unexpected location:

If then the whole community of the Anointed has come together in one place and everyone is speaking in ecstatic languages and outsiders or non-members come in, will they not say that you are mad? But if everyone is prophesying and some non-members or uninitiated persons come in, they will be convicted by all, called to account by all, the secrets of their hearts are exposed; and so they will fall on their faces and worship God and declare that “God really is present among you.” (SV)

36. The basic presumption of the modern interpreter is that Paul’s “experience” is individual and solitary.
37. 2 Corinthians 3:18 would come directly from this insight.
way. A new chapter has begun in what God has done and is doing. At the same time, this breakthrough experience is embedded in his encounter with Jesus followers. We do not know exactly how this experience occurred. We do know that Paul was in the process of harassing Jesus communities he would have regarded as blasphemously linking the execution of a social deviant with the pure God of Israel. Yet, these are his words intimating such a reversal. He discovers that somehow the God of Israel has remembered and validated that man’s life. A situation he originally found impure, distasteful, and marked for elimination becomes his new starting point.

Second, we can easily see that Paul is an apocalyptic visionary. His language from 1 Thessalonians to Romans betrays him in this. But it is also clear that Paul does not remain tied down to any one kind of apocalyptic scenario. Certainly there is a remarkable transition from the prophetic utterance of 1 Thessalonians (where the Son of Adam comes upon the clouds) to the cosmic birth pangs of creation in Romans 8. At the same time, we know from 1 Corinthians 7 that Paul does not consider things to be in any permanent condition. Indeed, in Gal 6:15 and 2 Cor 5:18–21 we know that he considers that a new situation has begun, a new regime is underway and capable of transforming all.

We can say that Paul did not anticipate “the long run,” nor did he see things as an “ongoing concern.” His future was not that of the author of Acts. Nor did he underscore the “status quo” that was the work of the writer of the Pastorals. He held that things could be dramatically altered since he believed that this altered state had begun. In effect, Paul was attempting to see change as positive; something that was not a given in his world. Moreover, he saw some change as transformative. This evoked the apocalyptic speech; it was also enabled by such speech. Change could be seen as a plus. 1 Corinthians 7 points to his sense of the temporal state of things. Romans 8 indicates that there is a transformative state of affairs now underway. (This is furthered by his reflections on his kinsfolk in Romans 9–11, where he sees no “final solution” but an open-ended reliance upon the wisdom of God.)

But how long can one ride the earthquake? How long can the tremor continue? (Jefferson and his notion of “eternal revolution” would be in this camp.) For Paul there may have been a window of opportunity, supported by the early years of the Neronian principate. This would have allowed him to imagine some room, some chance for this universal vision, embedded in translocal assemblies.

38. This is where Acts is greatly misleading. Not only do latter interpreters put a horse into the scene in Acts but readers simply put the material in Acts into Galatians! But, if we start with Galatians we are left with a few indirect clues.

39. For Paul it was not a matter of establishing a “going concern” but of aiding and abetting a counter revolution. Yet unlike Fidel, Paul disappeared. We could also compare the different fates of T. Paine and J. Madison.

Moreover, Paul’s apocalyptic accent cannot be fully understood without considering the echo chamber of Paul’s sound world.\textsuperscript{41} When Paul was declaring that a new regime has taken over in 2 Cor 5:18, he was speaking in a world dominated by the Roman gospel.

\textsuperscript{14}From now on, therefore, we don’t look at anyone from a worldly point of view. Even though we thought of God’s Anointed in that way, we think of him in that way no longer.\textsuperscript{15} Consequently, for anyone in solidarity with God’s Anointed, it is as if there is a new world order. The old order is gone, look—the new order has arrived!\textsuperscript{16} All of this comes from God who changes our relationship with the divine through the Anointed and has made us agents of this change.\textsuperscript{17} God is, as it were, changing the world’s relation with the divine through the Anointed, not charging their deficits to their accounts, and entrusting us with this message of change.\textsuperscript{18} We act as agents of God’s Anointed, as if God were making an appeal through us. On behalf of God’s Anointed we implore you: Accept the new terms of our relationship with God: \textsuperscript{19}<It’s as if> God took him, a coin in mint condition, and treated him as if he were <a> coin that had lost its value for our benefit so that through him we might be recast into the coinage of God’s integrity.\textsuperscript{20} (SV)

In fact, one need only read critically the opening to Romans to see that Paul is directly countering the Gospel of Rome.

Paul, slave of God’s Anointed, Jesus—summoned as an envoy [and] appointed to announce God’s world-changing news,\textsuperscript{21} which was anticipated by the prophets in holy scriptures.\textsuperscript{22} This news is about the “son of God”—who was physically descended from David,\textsuperscript{23} appointed and empowered as “son of God,” in accordance

\textsuperscript{41} Here is the wisdom of J. White’s Apostle of God. He demonstrates that Paul’s writings only make sense when one perceives the rich metaphorical field of the imperial world as the backdrop and default of Paul’s speech.

\textsuperscript{42} 5:16 This verse brings out the consequences of vv. 14–15. Human standard not simply point of view (NRS) indicates that a matter of judgment, value and comparison is at stake. Paul implies that even the valuation of God’s anointed can be a matter of judgment based upon the old regime.

\textsuperscript{43} 5:17 It is not just a notion of creation but of a new order of the universe, a new foundation has been laid. There is a new establishment of what constitutes reality—a new world order.

\textsuperscript{44} 5:18 katallasso- The usual default translation is to reconcile. This implies a return to status quo ante. But we do not have this in 2 Cor 5:14–21. A new situation is argued for in arresting images. One root meaning for this verb is to change money (LS 899) which leads to the sense of exchange. If Paul is considering the founding of a new world order, could he be using the root metaphor of reminting the coinage? The term transformation suggests this sense of fundamental change.

\textsuperscript{45} 5:19 As if indicates Paul’s further working out of his sense of a new cosmic situation. The stress is on a novel development, even a change in the image of divine vis-à-vis the world.

\textsuperscript{46} 5:21 The root metaphor may well be that of reminting new coins from old. This would nicely tie in the notion of a new cosmic order. No restoration, but a revolution. Cf. Zenon Papyrus (“Letter to Apollonius”), P. Cair. Zen. I 59021. Ginomai as to be cast into new money.
with the spirit of holiness, from the time of his resurrection from the dead—Jesus, the Anointed, our lord. Through him I have received the gracious favor of my calling to promote in his name the obedience that comes from a confident reliance upon God among all of the world’s nations. You yourselves are among those who are called, since you belong to Jesus the Anointed. [I am writing this] to all of God’s beloved in Rome, called to be God’s own people: may gracious favor and peace from God our great benefactor and from our lord Jesus the Anointed be with you. (SV)

Paul sent his letter to the very heart of the Empire. The audience of Paul would not have missed the political nuances of Paul’s words. “Favor” (benefit) and “peace” were imperial slogans ever since Augustus established the miracle of the Pax Romana. The emperor embodied the virtues of loyalty (pietas/pistis) and justice (dikaiosune) and proclaimed a story (euaggelion) of remarkable success. Entitled “son of God” (filius divi), the emperor guaranteed the prosperity of the world through his official role and upheld an elitist pyramid of power, where the reigning 5% lived off the labor underneath. Romans’ formal introduction (1:1–7) and surprising claim that a ruler would die for his enemies (5:6ff.) would have offered a shocking counterpoint to the prevailing realm.47

Paul’s universal reach can be illustrated in his use of the figure of Abraham. Abraham becomes crucial for Paul. For this figure was already monumental in Hellenistic Judaism. Abraham formed the cultural bridge that spanned non-Jew and Jew. Philo found in Abraham the ideal figure to represent the movement of “the nations” into the fold of universal Israel. Indeed, Abraham functioned as a primary symbol of social fidelity and the guarantee of the reliability of life. Here we see that Abraham rivals Aeneas, the imperial icon. Virgil hit upon this figure to help establish the political fiction of Augustus’ rule. Virgil enabled the construction of a new political reality matching the historical developments of the late first century BCE and early first century CE. Was Paul taking a page from Virgil? Is he the mythologizer of the new movement? Or, is this another aspect of the universalizing trends within first-century Judaism? Was this a figure to help establish the ideology of a translocal community?

We can also see that Paul’s understanding of the death of Jesus furthered this universal perspective. Paul expanded the meaning of Jesus’ death. He took over the heroic notion of the death of Jesus from the Syrian Communities and universalized its meaning for all those who are considered disadvantaged or sub-human. He pushed the originally ethnic validation onto a more universal landscape. Indeed, the death of Jesus for Paul exposes what the God of Israel is presently about. By having the same trust that Jesus had all can have access to the One who empowers creation.48

48. For Paul the death of Jesus is actually more about God, than Jesus. God is seen as ultimately reliable for what God did to Jesus.
Is Paul then a universal thinker who would dissolve differences within his new vision? This seems to be the case according to Daniel Boyarin.\(^49\) In fact, one can point out that throughout his letters he does make a case for distinguishing his position from others. He does distance his present situation from his former behavior with *loulaiosmos*. He sets himself over against those who would not engage in inclusive table fellowship.\(^50\) He goes beyond the Syrian communities’ version of the death of Jesus. He even seems to change his apocalyptic tone (contrast 1 Thess and Rom 8). And does he not reiterate the slogan in Gal 3:28?

You are no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or freeborn, no longer “male and female.” Instead, you all have the same status in the service of God’s Anointed, Jesus. (SV)

Paul would seem to be in the company of other universal thinking Jews of the first century, in addition to that of the cynic-stoic philosophers who would think in cosmic, not limited, terms. He also can re-read the prophets of old from this utopian standpoint.\(^51\) This would also place Paul in the imperial entourage, where the ecumenical dreams of Alexander and Augustus were played out. Certainly the ensuing trajectory of his thought found in Ephesians and Colossians, as noted above, plays on this theme. But the Pauline evidence is not that easily commandeered by this conclusion. Does Paul in his universalizing perspective do away with differences?

It is at this point that we need to return to Paul’s notion of the “Body of the Anointed.” Earlier we noted that it is used comically to underscore the worth of all the members of the community. Difference, in fact, is respected and part and parcel of how the community exists. But in Ephesians and Colossians changes are underway. Already a hierarchical structure entailing a mythic advantage has entered the picture. The body is no longer “plastic,” that is, able to be played in a comic performance. Instead, it is a serious organization with all its compartments in order. Difference, the marginal, is disappearing. Paul, meanwhile, has been demoted from *apostolos* to an ecclesial servant (*diakonos*) (Col 1:25). No longer, moreover, is there some concern for another’s reaction to the non-observance of religious customs (Col 2:16). While in Romans 14 Paul is still very aware of the other, Col 3:11 would dissolve all distinctions. Christ will be all in all. A remarkable development has taken off from PL. The wall of division has been broken down, as commandments and ordinances disappear. There is a creation of a new humanity in one body, the “household of God.” Does this structure mythically replace the lost Temple “to all generations”? No longer is

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50. Of course, this would be Paul’s perspective (and taken some time after the incident). The situation might well have been an attempt to adjust to the new reality of different groups trying to live within a translocal association that still had to determine lines of identity, respecting differences from various sides.

an apocalyptic interruption possible. Instead differences are noted in order to maintain hierarchical reality. Other differences are obliterated—such as delicate Jewish issues. The difficult balance of PL has been lost.

In contrast I would contend that Paul was not founding an institution but he was constructing communities, where a social experiment was underway. What was at stake was the re-envisioning of the basic categories of social life. Shame, status, identity, and social purity were all up for grabs. The marginalized were allowed into this social crucible. This was the implication of Paul’s breakthrough that the God of Israel had affirmed that social outcast Jesus. It was confirmed through his experience of the Jesus communities, where non-Jews were seen as acceptable by this God.

It is here that we need to inquire into whether the collection for Jerusalem can help us in this investigation. Galatians 2:9 may well presuppose an early attempt to work out how the surprising emergence of a translocal association might be managed. There is nothing definitive that, even by the time Paul would have delivered the collection, there was some sort of overall control by Jerusalem. Yet, Paul would deliver this collection as an indication of the equal participation of the congregations of “the nations” in this translocal association. While Paul might downplay the so-called “pillars” to the Galatians he still wants to affirm a fundamental koinonia between Jewish and Gentile followers of the Anointed. As M. Miller points out, the early Jesus associations were principally local phenomena. It is Paul, the Diaspora boundary crosser, who sees the translocal connection. The collection becomes for him an opportunity to put this vision into practice. Moreover, this vision would entail a sense of connection where difference is noted and affirmed.

At the same time this social construction must be seen vis-à-vis the Empire as the social default. To speak of a “new world” or “foundation,” to invoke an iconic figure rivaling Aeneas, and to employ the imperial terms of its “gospel” mean that Paul was conscious of what he saw as the primary competition. Does this opposition to the Imperial Gospel mean that Paul has brought his social and religious insight to another level? On the other hand, since he saw himself as a prophet for the God of Israel for those disadvantaged of the world, was he not reaffirming the trajectory of Judaism? Was his construction of new social space an attempt to gain room for the trek of Abraham?

What was Paul aiming at? From his writings we can see that the nobodies of the world now have direct access to the power of the cosmos. This would,

52. M. Miller, “Antioch, Paul, and Jerusalem,” 226. The major study against which Miller makes some significant critiques and contributions is D. Georgi, Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem.

53. But what happens when one stands against a corporate giant? Do the same things happen to the opposition? Do they take on the characteristics of the default? Or, have we missed what Paul was up to? Does this happen already with Paul or is that the case with the Pauline traditions?
in contrast to the imperial construction of social space, thereby constitute a systemic threat. “Fortunately” this experiment was negated by the second century and completely displaced by the fourth-century success story. Paul was creating metaphorical space; a transformative domain; a dislocation; not a re-centering but a de-centering.

Again, let us ask: What was Paul doing? What did he intend? What did he see? Where was he going? Is Paul a universal thinker? An empire builder? What practices did he put into play? Does his thinking entail the destruction of difference?\(^5^4\)

What if Paul delivered another option: the practice of recognizing and affirming difference? This starts with his problem with an impure group he would harass. He discovers in the death of Jesus the move of the God of Israel to accept the unacceptable, the impure, and the social outcast. Paul starts his social experiment on the margin. His stance towards gentile followers comes out of this vision on the margin.\(^5^5\) Paul’s social experiment entails a difference within unity. But does not Gal 3:28 mean the obliteration of difference? Rather is it not for Paul the obliteration of social advantage? If we take Gal 3:28 by itself or couple it with the material from the deutero Pauline Letters we can easily conclude that Paul would dissolve all differences. But what happens when we read the entire letter to the Galatians in its probable social context? What happens, moreover, if we bring Romans 9–11 into the discussion? In Romans Paul points out that even the non-follower cannot be done away with. There is no final solution for Paul. Even the “unaccountable” has to be allowed. Indeed, the death of Jesus before his own breakthrough was so “unaccountable.”

To find out how Paul tried to work out this distinctive vision of community, we have to follow Paul through each of his letters, sorting out how he discovered what this meant as the communities learned to live and eat together. His utopian, universal vision that begins with a discrepancy, a difference, an impurity, an interruption, infiltrates his table fellowship. Here the extended Corinthian correspondence becomes quite important. It is in how he handles the issues embedded in table fellowship that we find out how he tries to create the space for social experiment, where differences are noted, erased, allowed, affirmed, etc.

Was Paul a universalist? Utopian? Yes. But with a difference. And with the notion of difference comes the questions of denial, marginalization, and hierarchical power relations (class, gender, race, empire).\(^5^6\)

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54. This has been much of the considerable reading of Paul—which enabled Christianity and Western Colonialism to advance.

55. Of course, this can be the starting point of a number of associations in the first century. And, as mentioned above, this breakthrough may have come from recognizing the worth of difference within the assemblies he was harassing.

56. For a penetrating investigation of this line of thought see Jae Won Lee, Paul and the Politics of Difference.
Was Paul then the founder of Christianity? Certainly I would contend this is an anachronistic question. But it does suggest that Paul may have set something in motion that, when focused on from a distance, was transformed, transmogrified, and mutated.

His grass roots experiment was replanted and sustained in a new environment. Stanley Stowers uses an analogy from evolutionary biology to talk of the exaptation by the later social environment of earlier elements in the Pauline communities.\textsuperscript{57} Is this like the possibility of recently discovered mammoth DNA being carried by modern elephants?

Perhaps another image may help return us to Paul’s experiment. Paul would have pushed for the universal in the particular. He would opt for the allowance and celebration of difference in the midst of utopian possibility. At the moment the world-wide web plays a similar role, especially to the dismay of the hegemonies of power.

The ultimate difficulty with determining an answer to the question of Paul and the origins of Christianity is that Paul failed. His vision, energized by apocalyptic imagery and embedded in the developing, recalcitrant communities, was not sustained for more than a generation. It was recast against the default scenarios of the ancient world by the end of the first century. His sense of transformative change at the heart of history’s momentum, his conviction that advantage over another was not the goal of human life, and his trust that Reality was ultimately reliable, did not survive intact the revisions of the second and fourth centuries. Yet, now and again, some groups have caught the electric surge of Paul’s social attempt; they have tried to orchestrate again his unfinished symphony. Sadly, such attempts have seemed like cacophony to established ecclesial ears.

\textsuperscript{57} Stowers, “Mythmaking,” 493.
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———, “The Masks of Paul,” Forum n.s. 7,2 (Fall 2004): 159–76.


Voting Record

Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins Fall 2006

Voting records from the inaugural session of the Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins are reported here. These voting tables represent the range of the Fellows’ agreement or disagreement with theses discussed in papers that appear in this issue of Forum, as well as theses previously proposed by the late Westar founder, Robert W. Funk.1 The colors represent degrees of historical reliability (or of support for a proposition or statement).

Red: This information is virtually certain. It is supported by a preponderance of the evidence.

Pink: The information is not certain, but probably reliable. It fits well with evidence that is verifiable.

Gray: The information is possible, but unreliable. It is not a clear fabrication, but lacks supporting evidence.

Black: This information is improbable. It does not fit verifiable evidence, or it seems to be a fabrication.

The votes are reported as percentages and rounded to the nearest hundredth, which occasionally results in a total not identical to 100%. The four colors are weighted, respectively, as 3, 2, 1, and 0. The weighted average (in italics) is then converted to a scale of 1.00, with each quadrant representing a different color: up to .25 = black, above .25 to .50 = gray, above .50 to .75 = pink, above .75 = red.

The names appended to a particular proposition identify those who suggested that statement as a proper subject for scholarly investigation and debate. They do not reflect how that person (would have) voted or recommended others to vote on that thesis. Such information can be inferred only from a careful reading of each author’s paper.


FORUM THIRD SERIES 1,2 FALL 2007

249
Did Christianity Begin with Jesus? (Philip Devenish/Robert Funk)

1. Christianity began with Jesus. (Basic Proposition)
   - 0.28 Gray 14% Red 17% Pink 7% Gray 62% Black
2. Christian experience, or faith, began when some people encountered Jesus positively as ultimately decisive for their lives. (Devenish)
   - 0.47 Gray 31% Red 7% Pink 34% Gray 28% Black
3. Christian witness began with the Jesus-kerygma (i.e., the re-presented words and deeds of Jesus), not the Christ-kerygma (i.e., confessional claims made about Jesus’ person. (Devenish/Funk)
   - 0.59 Pink 38% Red 24% Pink 14% Gray 24% Black
4. Christianity began when Jesus used imaginative language to call into question his received life world in favor of the life world that emerges in his parables and aphorisms. (Funk)
   - 0.55 Pink 34% Red 21% Pink 21% Gray 24% Black
5. Christianity began when the followers of Jesus adjusted the Jesus tradition to fit more comfortably within the received life world of his/their time and place. (Funk)
   - 0.47 Pink 14% Red 41% Pink 17% Gray 28% Black
6. Christianity began in Galilee. (Devenish)
   - 0.70 Pink 55% Red 21% Pink 3% Gray 21% Black
7. Jesus of Nazareth should be included in the discussion of Christian origins. (Programmatic Proposition)
   - 0.86 Red 82% Red 4% Pink 4% Gray 11% Black

Did Christianity Begin with the Resurrection? (Daniel Smith/Joseph Bessler)

1. Christianity began with the resurrection of Jesus. (Basic proposition)
   - 0.08 Black 0% Red 3% Pink 16% Gray 81% Black
2. It is impossible to imagine the emergence of Christian faith following Jesus’ death without positing the physical resurrection of Jesus. (Smith)
   - 0.09 Black 3% Red 0% Pink 16% Gray 81% Black
3. Resurrection is the central claim of all forms of early Christian faith. (Smith)
   - 0.02 Black 0% Red 0% Pink 6% Gray 94% Black
4. Claims about Jesus’ resurrection, translation, ascension, or other forms of divine vindication were expressions of faith in Jesus, but not the origins of that faith. (Smith/Bessler)
   - 0.85 Red 58% Red 39% Pink 3% Gray 0% Black
5. Since Jesus’ words and deeds were not primarily self-referential, his personal demise at the hands of the Romans would not have constituted a “crisis of faith” for his friends and followers. (Bessler)
   - 0.56 Pink 26% Red 29% Pink 32% Gray 13% Black
6. In Christian theology, the resurrection has functioned to authorize Christian faith and practice by connecting it to the transcendent world, not as an account of how Christianity began. (Bessler)
   - 0.82 Red 52% Red 42% Pink 6% Gray 0% Black
7. Resurrection is the central claim of some forms of early Christian faith.

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8. Resurrection is the central claim of many forms of early Christian faith.

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Did Christianity Begin at Pentecost? (Shelly Matthews/Todd Penner)

1. Christianity began with the event of Pentecost described in Acts 2. (Basic proposition)

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2. The Acts version of Christian origins is a rhetorical construction, the author is attempting to “create” Christianity. (Matthews, Penner)

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3. Like other ancient writers, the author of Acts is concerned primarily with the establishment of the character or ethos of the group when he utilizes the motif of beginnings. (Penner)

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4. The motif of xenoglossy in Acts 2 functions rhetorically to display numinous power in this birthing moment without necessary connection to any actual early Christian charismatic experiences. (Penner)

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5. Charismata such as tongues and prophecy were significant aspects of early Christian experience. (Matthews)

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6. The authority of slaves and women to speak for God was bound up with the question of the legitimacy of spiritual gifts. (Matthews)

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7. Luke's efforts to write history suitable for “Theophilus” required that he erase the agency and contributions of slaves and women from his historical narrative. (Matthews)

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8. Elite male privilege is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)

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9. A totalizing vision, modeled on the Roman quest for world domination, is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)

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10. While he did not have precise language to describe the split he imagines, Luke asserted that his social group was distinct from “the Jews.” (Matthews)

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11. The fusion of the categories “morally depraved” and “non-believing Jew” is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)

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Did Christianity Begin with Paul? (Arthur J. Dewey)

1. Paul argues for communal practice that recognizes and affirms difference.

2. What was at stake for Paul was the re-envisioning of the basic categories of social life.

3. Paul’s vision countered the gospel of Empire.

4. The perspective of the historical Paul was greatly lost or revised by later tradition.

5. Paul was the founder of Christianity.

6. The historical Paul was intent on constructing a new religion.

7. Paul argues for communal practice that recognizes and affirms some difference.

8. Christianity began as a movement among Jews. It would not become recognizable as a distinct new religion until many years later, after the first generation of Jesus’ followers had passed from the scene.