

# Preface

In the spring of 2016 the Christianity Seminar focused its efforts on a renewed discussion of “origins” within the early Christian movement. The roots of this enterprise have been extensively researched in recent decades, yet the light of such work has yielded promising suggestions about the early Jesus movement that demand further consideration and exploration. As such, it seemed appropriate here to solicit additional comments and research data on this important topic.

As an essential component of this task, the Seminar turned toward specific examination of the career contributions of Burton L. Mack, who currently stands as John Wesley Professor Emeritus in early Christianity at the Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. Mack’s undaunted quests to explore the early church’s formation have appeared variously in significant publications, including key well-regarded volumes such as *A Myth of Innocence* (1988), *The Lost Gospel* (1993), and *Who Wrote the New Testament?* (1995). His insights into the rise of nascent Christian consciousness have had tremendous impact on scholarship devoted to NT studies and early patristic formation. His career deserves review and respect for its impact.

The present issue opens with a paper by Mack himself that was delivered as a challenge to how we see the influence of studies related to the roots of the NT on the formation of later Christian awareness in contemporary American society. His suggestions indicate that much of what academic scholarship has achieved in biblical studies is essentially being lost to the larger institutional church’s world because of how politics and economics have altered the direction of Western society’s view of itself as Christian. It is a sobering challenge indeed.

Thereafter appear two papers that respond to Mack’s career and work. The first is by Ron Cameron (Wesleyan University), who discusses in critical detail the various contributions provided to scholarship by Mack’s efforts. Cameron succinctly diagnoses each movement within Mack’s developing train of thought related to social consciousness in the first-century Jesus movement’s rise to the public stage. He speaks of “origins” and “redescription” as essential components of how the Mack agenda has reshaped contemporary ideas about first-century Jewish views as they produced our NT literature and beyond. His bibliography of resources includes a large offering of Mack’s writings and is not to be missed.

The second response is offered by Maia Kotrosits (Denison University) and is directed more specifically to Mack's own paper contained in this issue as it relates to his earlier insights and career. Kotrosits speaks of the processes of "myth-making" and models of "the Christian myth" that Mack has provided as guidelines for understanding early Christian origins. While accepting facets of this contribution, she likewise offers challenges to those who would paint the first-century world in broad brush strokes without consideration of broader details and contexts. In the final analysis, she accepts his call to be "interdisciplinary" in perspective, noting the importance of such efforts for future research.

Finally, this issue concludes with two related essays by Dennis E. Smith (late Professor Emeritus of Phillips Theological Seminary), who passed away on 16 September 2017 in Galveston, Texas related to complications from his long fight with cancer. His contributions to this issue were rendered for publication in the last days of his life and, with his traditional focus on meal settings in the early house church, seemed a fitting addition for this issue's focus on Christian origins. Smith has included first-account photographs to illustrate the archaeological evidence for his views concerning ancient meals, as well as extensive analyses of biblical scenarios in which the "invitation" to dine illustrates the ancient world's concern for hospitality and the early Jesus movement's attempts to include all classes of society into its fold. His comments on the Gospel of Mark form ready parallels to Mack's own research in this regard. We will miss him dearly, both as a steady contributor to the *Forum* and as an enthusiastic colleague.