The Rehabilitation of Heresy: ‘Misquoting’ Earliest Christianity

Rodney J. Decker, Th.D.
Professor of NT, Baptist Bible Seminary
www.NTResources.com

Bible Faculty Summit, July 2007
Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis

Introduction

And he spoke a parable unto them, saying, there once was a certain man named Joe. He taught many things which were quite different from his contemporaries. Those who heard him were impressed with his wisdom. Some even thought he was more than a mere man. After he died his ideas were developed by other people, not all of whom were as insightful as Joe. As a result, many divergent groups developed in different places, each claiming to represent Joe’s “true” teaching, despite the fact that they taught very different things and had very different views as to who Joe was. This continued for several centuries, but eventually one of the groups, the Joeists, was able to dominate the others through political savvy, lots of cash, administrative skill, and outright force. Once they had achieved power, the Joeists ruthlessly persecuted the other groups, destroyed their writings, and sought to obliterate their very memory. The winners in this very nasty ideological war proceeded to rewrite history to make it appear as if the Joeists had been the only group in existence from the very beginning. They revised the early documents that told about Joe to make them sound like Joe taught exactly what the Joeists believed. They compiled these modified documents into an official literary corpus and allowed people to read only from the approved list. In addition they wrote very strict definitions as to what people were allowed to believe and say about Joe. And so Joeism became a new world religion, spreading across the planet, but always tightly controlled by the original leaders in Joeville.

Fast forward several millennia. Joeism is still a dominant religion, though it has developed some untidy edges and some people, especially the intelligentsia, have begun challenging the official Joeist history. Discontent has grown to such proportions that the Joeist leaders in Joeville can no longer control what people think about Joe. An intellectual battle ensues in which the advocates of freedom challenge the very historicity and accuracy of the official documents describing Joe. A search for the “real, historical Joe” is undertaken. Some scholars even have the audacity to claim that the copies of the Joeist records then in existence were not accurate, that they had been doctored by the leaders of Joeism over the years to make them appear to support the official Joeist party line. Since none have ever seen the original copies of these documents, doubt is cast on
their reliability. And then one day someone discovers some old, forgotten documents that dated to the early centuries of the Joeist movement. This discovery at a mysterious place called Gan Dammahi draws worldwide attention as the intellectual freedom fighters point out that the picture of Joe in these ancient documents is quite different from the official story of Joeism. Other discoveries follow and many copies of the original documents that the early Joeists had tried to destroy turn up. Joeism’s early oppression of other groups who followed Joe is exposed as a fraud. The “real Joe” turns out to be a simple country moralist who said a lot of contradictory things and perhaps even had some political ambitions. But one thing is sure, the Joe of Joeism is a fraud and Joeism is doomed.

My parable, of course, is fictional, but far closer to reality than one might think. One only need change “Joe” to “Jesus,” “Joeism” to “Orthodoxy” (particularly Roman Catholic orthodoxy), and “intellectual freedom fighters” to “modern Jesus scholars” to have a fairly accurate picture of much recent discussion regarding Jesus and the history of the early church. The controversy regarding Jesus is certainly not new; it dates back now several centuries. Players and positions shift and morph over time, but one constant remains: the belief that the Jesus of orthodox Christianity cannot be who the church claims that he is.

Surprisingly, the recent popularity of a radically revised history of Christianity based on long lost documents is not new. Jenkins summarizes an often-forgotten history of such sources and proposals which have been “a perennial phenomenon within Western culture since the Enlightenment.” The impetus for the recent outbreak of speculation has not been the discovery of new data very different from what we have known for a long time. Rather it is, according to Jenkins, a philosophical/ideological shift in Western culture:


postmodernism and feminism. The anti-authority thrust of postmodernism and particularly the view of documentary authority as a means of oppression (thus the rejection of authorial intent and the advocacy of deconstructionism) has spawned a widespread acceptance of various conspiracy theories accusing the church (usually the Roman Catholic Church) of suppressing primitive truth. Ironically, these “new” approaches accomplish (or seek to do so) the same end, only now it is the NT texts that are deprivileged and the “lost gospels” are virtually canonized with the result that these pseudepigraphal texts are granted supreme value and accuracy. Jenkins refers to this as “a kind of inverted fundamentalism, a loving consecration of the noncanonical.”

One of the current writers in the media spotlight is Bart Ehrman. He is not the first nor only voice advocating a radical overhaul of our conception of early Christianity. He has been, however, one of the more visible and influential voices. This is due to several factors. First, he is a credentialed scholar in a related discipline, NT textual criticism. In this regard he seems to have benefited from his association with the “dean” of that field, Bruce Metzger. He is also a good writer and effective communicator. In addition, he has achieved broad media exposure for his popularization of more scholarly work. His major publications relevant to the history of early Christianity include the following.

• *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (1993)
• *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005)

The thesis which Ehrman proposes runs as follows, in his own words. After listing a wide range of phenomena in the diverse groups comprising “Christendom”9—including everything from Roman Catholic missionaries, snake handlers, Greek Orthodoxy, fundamentalists, mainline churches, to David Koresh—Ehrman writes,

> All this diversity of belief and practice, and the intolerance that occasionally results, makes it difficult to know whether we should think of Christianity as one thing or lots of things, whether we should speak of Christianity or Christianities.

> What could be more diverse than this variegated phenomenon, Christianity in the modern world? In fact, there may be an answer: Christianity in the ancient world.…..

> Most of these ancient forms of Christianity are unknown to people in the world today, since they eventually came to be reformed or stamped out. As a result, the sacred texts that some ancient Christians used to support their religious perspectives came to be proscribed, destroyed, or forgotten—in one way or another lost.…. 

Virtually all forms of modern Christianity … go back to one form of Christianity that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the second and third centuries. This one form of Christianity decided what was the “correct” Christian perspective; it decided who could exercise authority over Christian belief and practice; and it determined what forms of Christianity would be marginalized, set aside, destroyed. It also decided which books to canonize into Scripture and which books to set aside as “heretical,” teaching false ideas.

> And then, as a coup de grâce, this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been “orthodox” (i.e., the “right belief”) and that its opponents in the conflict, with their other scriptural texts, had always represented small splinter groups invested in deceiving people into “heresy.”

It is striking that, for centuries, virtually everyone who studied the history of early Christianity simply accepted the version of the early conflicts written by the orthodox victors. This all began to change in a significant way in the nineteenth century as some scholars began to question the “objectivity” of such early Christian writers as the fourth-century orthodox writer Eusebius, the so-called Father of Church History, who reproduced for us the earliest account of the conflict. This initial query into Eusebius’ accuracy eventually became, in some circles, a virtual onslaught on his character, as twentieth-century scholars began to subject his work to an ideological critique that exposed his biases and their role in his presentation. This

---

9 The use of “Christendom” is my term, intended to be understood as a very broad cover term for any and all groups that profess any form of allegiance to Jesus and/or the term Christian. Ehrman calls it simply “Christianity”—with no consideration as to how that ought to be defined.
reevaluation of Eusebius was prompted, in part, by the discovery of additional ancient books … other Gospels, for example, that also claimed to be written in the names of apostles.10

Ehrman is quite right that this is not the traditional portrait of early Christianity. But it is by no means original with him, though he has done as much to popularize it as anyone in recent years. The real credit for this view of history belongs to Walter Bauer,11 so though we will return to Ehrman’s tributary later, we turn first to the fountain and examine Bauer’s thesis.

Bauer’s Orthodoxy and Heresy (1934)

Brilliant, profound, extremely well read, indefatigable—all accurate descriptions of the German scholar to whom we owe much. Although I will take sharp issue with Bauer’s thesis under consideration, I have a great respect for his lexical work12—as we all should since this is the same Bauer represented by the initial ‘B’ in BDAG—Bauer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. No serious work in NT exegesis is possible without reference to this lexicon, whether the third English edition13 or the sixth German edition.14 But before the professor from Göttingen turned his attention to lexicography 15 Walter Bauer (1877–1960) published several works

---


11 It is possible that the core of Bauer’s ideas are much older; Brown refers to Semler’s contention that “the present canon is arbitrary and represents the victory of the Roman see in the ecclesiastical politics of the early church” (Harold O. J. Brown, Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 71, citing Johann Semler, Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons [Halle: Hemmerde, 1776], but no page reference is given; I have not had access to Semler’s work to see if the idea is developed further).

There are definitely other contributing factors, most of which are closer at hand than Semler’s 18th century work. Desjardins comments that Bauer’s "study was a natural extension of a preceding century’s scholarly work," listing the Tübingen school (F. C. Bauer), the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, and Harnack’s work on heresy and the Gnostics as direct contributors to the thesis of Bauer’s Orthodoxy and Heresy ("Bauer and Beyond," 67–68). See also Robinson, The Bauer Thesis, 15–18, who qualifies the nature of the relationship between Tübingen/F. C. Bauer and Walter Bauer’s argument.

12 My extensive tribute to BDAG may be found at <www.NTResources.com/bdag.html>. It should be noted that Danker’s contributions to the English edition are at least equally valuable with Bauer’s original work.

13 Edited by Fredrick Danker (Univ. of Chicago, 2000). The first English translation, known as "BAG," had appeared in 1957, based on the 4th German edition. The second English edition of 1979 ("BAGD") was based on the 5th edition of the German work. See n. 15.


15 Bauer was the editor for the 1928, 2d edition of Preuschen’s lexicon with the 3d edition of 1937 bearing Bauer’s name alone. The 4th edition in 1949–52 was the most significant revision, followed by a 5th ed., the last edited by Bauer, in 1957–58; a 6th ed. of the German work appeared in 1988 (see n. 14). For a
on the history of the early church including a 1903 study of the Syrian canon of the epistles in the 4th and 5th centuries\textsuperscript{16} and another in 1909 of Jesus in the apocrypha.\textsuperscript{17} Bauer published a major work in 1934 which has had major influence in its field: \textit{Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity}.\textsuperscript{18} Although widely discussed on the Continent and in England,\textsuperscript{19} it was not until the release of an English translation almost forty years later that its impact was felt in America.\textsuperscript{20} Since that time it has influenced almost every discussion of the topic.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Orthodoxy and Heresy} is not a full statement of Bauer’s ideas regarding the origins of orthodoxy and heresy, but this essay does not allow a broader discussion of Bauer’s other writings.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Summary of Bauer’s Thesis}\textsuperscript{23}

Bauer’s \textit{Orthodoxy and Heresy} argues that we cannot merely assume that orthodoxy came first and that heresy is a later deviation for in doing so we “simply agree with the judgment of the anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period” (xxi). This is neither scientific nor fair since we are listening to only one voice—that of the winners; we do not allow the losers to speak for themselves.

\textsuperscript{16} Der Apostolos der Syrer in der Zeit von der Mitte des vierten Jahrhunderts bis zur Spaltung der Syrischen Kirche [= The Apostolos of the Syrians from the Middle of the Fourth Century to the Division of the Syrian Church] (Geissen: Ricker/Töpelmann, 1903).

\textsuperscript{17} Das Leben Jesu: Im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen [= The Life of Jesus: In the Time of the NT Apocrypha] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

\textsuperscript{18} Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 10 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1934; 2d ed., ed. G. Strecker, Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1964). The text of the two editions is essentially the same with only typographical corrections; the major difference is the addition of two essays by Strecker in the 2d edition.

\textsuperscript{19} See Appendix 2, “The Reception of the Book” by Georg Strecker in the English edition of Bauer (pp. 286–316) for a listing of reviews and an extensive discussion of reactions to Bauer’s German work.


\textsuperscript{21} A surprising exception is the 500 page work on heresy by Brown (Heresies). I can find no citation of Bauer in the footnotes and he is not listed in the index. Although one chapter bibliography lists the title (ch. 2, p. 22), there is no interaction with Bauer in the chapter.

\textsuperscript{22} For a survey of the relevant material from Bauer’s previous books and articles, see Hans Deiter Betz, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity,” \textit{Interpretation} 19 (1965): 299–311.

\textsuperscript{23} In this section references to the English translation of Bauer’s \textit{Orthodoxy and Heresy} are given parenthetically (as is also the case in other summaries that follow). The sketch given here cannot be complete due to limitations of space, but the main lines of Bauer’s argument are traced, though without much of his supporting evidence. I have tried to make the summary just that and refrain from critique at this point. When I could not restrain, I have added my comment in a footnote. The reader is encouraged to read Bauer before speaking authoritatively on his position.
Perhaps ... certain manifestations of Christian life that the authors of the church renounce as "heresies" originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply "Christianity." The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority (xxii).

This is the hypothesis that Bauer proposes to test, though as has been pointed out, Bauer's professed neutral critical method too frequently slips into the role of defense lawyer or apologist for the heretics rather than impartial judge of the evidence.²⁴ The evidence he examines in subsequent chapters is considered geographically, area by area to determine the evidence for what form/s of Christianity are attested in the earliest discernible period. Bauer begins with Edessa and follows with Egypt, Antioch, Asia Minor, and Rome.

Syrian Edessa, located on a tributary of the Euphrates just north of the present north-central border of Turkey and Syria, is the focus of Bauer's first chapter. After discrediting all traditional accounts of the origins of Christianity in Edessa, Bauer argues that the original form of Christianity there was Marcionite, and that not until mid-2d century, followed by Bardesanes and his followers shortly afterwards. It was not until the end of the 2d century that there is any trace of what came later to be known as orthodoxy, and they remained a small minority through the 4th century. Only in the 5th century is orthodoxy finally imposed on Edessa by the "rather coarse methods" of Bishop Rabbula, the "tyrant of Edessa" (27). The "beginnings for the history of Christianity in Edessa ... rests on an unmistakably heretical basis" (43).

Egypt next receives attention. Bauer declines to be discouraged by the silence of the sources regarding the early history of Christianity in Egypt since Edessan history establishes the pattern. Why would the churchmen have been "silent about the origins of Christianity in such an important center as Alexandria if there had been something favorable to report?" (45). The answer, though conjectural, is clear: Egyptian Christianity was, like Edessa, heretical in origin. The earliest form of the faith was Gnostic no later than the beginning of the 2d century. Not until the end of that century does orthodoxy appear and "even into the third century, no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished" (59).

Bauer then turns to Antioch, which, though seeming to the reader of the NT to be the bastion of orthodoxy,²⁵ has long been heavily influenced by heretical movements. Since

---

²⁴ I have read similar statements several times and do not know who originated the analogy. For two representative instances, see: James Moffat, "Review of Professor Bauer's Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum," Expository Times 45 (1933–34): 475 ("he tends to take the position of the barrister rather than of the judge"); and Michel Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Αἵρεσις in the Early Christian Era," Second Century 8 (1991): 68 n. 9 ("his professed impartiality shifts at times to an apologist on behalf of the 'heretics'").

²⁵ Bauer declines to consider NT evidence since it "seems to be both too unproductive and too much disputed to be able to serve as a point of departure" (Orthodoxy and Heresy, xxv).
Paul’s defeat there (Gal 2) Antioch “played no significant role in the history of the church” (63)—that is the orthodox church. Instead there is a syncretistic mixture of “Jewish Christianity,” Gentile Christianity [i.e., what was left of Paul’s influence], and Gnosticism. Not until the “frantic concern” (63) of Ignatius in the early 2d century is there a renewed attempt to reestablish orthodoxy. Ignatius, however, is not a reliable source since his exuberance causes him to lose “all sense of proportion … [so] one must be especially careful in evaluating the accuracy of his statements” (61). His attempt to impose a powerful monarchical bishop structure on the church is a political move by someone in a minority position attempting to gain power and control (62).

Asia Minor also shows unmistakable Gnostic influence, and that within the churches, as may be seen in John’s letters.26 Ignatius’ letters to churches in Asian Minor are also relevant here since they reflect the limit of his influence: he can expect to be heard in only a few churches, and even then he is attempting to “stretch the circle of his influence as widely as possible” (79). It is significant that four of the churches in the area which had earlier received letters from John are not included in Ignatius’ list; since these are the churches most severely rebuked by John, it is evident that they have moved into full blown heresy by the time of Ignatius (78–79). That Hierapolis and Colossae are “bypassed in icy silence by both John and Ignatius” (80) further reflects the lack of influence of orthodoxy in this area. Peter likewise is very selective in his address to the churches of Asia Minor (1 Pet 1:1), leaving large “blank spots on the map” of Asian orthodoxy: “there simply was nothing to be gained for ‘ecclesiastically’ oriented Christianity in that area at that time” (82). Even Ephesus, often perceived as the bastion of Pauline orthodoxy, has been lost to that cause by the end of the first century, perhaps to the extent that Paul’s foundational labors there had been forgotten: Paul “lost the contest in Ephesus” (85), something that was becoming evident even during Paul’s lifetime. Orthodoxy was only reorganized much later when the apostle John became their patron, likely due to the arrival of Jewish Christians (including John and Philip) from Jerusalem following the war with Rome. Yet even this did not result in an orthodox victory since the Pastorals still reflect a major problem with Gnosticism in the 2d century (89).

Next Bauer considers the Roman church and its tactics in establishing their particular brand of Christianity as the dominant form worldwide. The initial foray in this direction is Bauer’s study of 1 Clement, the letter from the church of Rome to the Corinthian church written near the end of the first century. We cannot trust the direct statements of this biased letter, says Bauer, but must read between the lines to reconstruct the actual situation which prompted the letter and decipher the real motivation for Rome’s letter. “Rome takes action not when it is overflowing with love or when the great concerns of the

26 John the “apocalyptic seer” is not very useful for the current question according to Bauer since his “extremely confused religious outlook that peculiarly mixes Jewish, Christian, and mythological elements and ends up in chiliasm …. [a] stormy outburst, seething with hate” marks him, not as an intellectual, spiritual leader of influence, but only “wishful thinking” (ibid., 77–78).
faith are really in jeopardy, but when there is at least the opportunity of enlarging its own sphere of influence” (97–98). The first evidence we have in 1 Clement since Rome noted that “internal discord greatly reduced the power of resistance of the Corinthian church, so that it seemed to be easy prey” (98). The specifics there involve the usurpation of the existing church leaders by younger ones; Rome writes in an effort to reinstate the older leaders who were more favorable to the Roman position. The conflict goes all the way back to Paul. Those rebuked by him as “the strong” were Gnostics who, though silenced at the time, had gradually increased in number (their position was more attractive to the community than Paul’s approach) though they chafed under the repressive leadership of the church. By the time of 1 Clement they had become strong enough to oust the leaders (which by this time were a coalition of the Paul and Cephas parties) and take over the church (100–01), perhaps even imposing an “energetic bishop” on the previously plural presbyterate (112). “Rome succeeded in imposing its will on Corinth” to the extent that a half century later the Corinthian church still accepted Roman authority and read 1 Clement in their services (104). And so began the Roman movement to consolidate her authority one church at a time, culminating in the exclusive establishment of Rome’s brand of Christianity, now branded as “orthodoxy,” in the 4th century.

The Roman juggernaut evidenced itself in later claims of apostolic succession used, not only in Rome, but elsewhere under Roman influence, in the fight against heresy. Rome also extended her influence through teaching Christians in other places and also through generous financial gifts—and “such gifts were not the least reason why their opponents emerged victorious” (122, seeming to imply that Rome’s opponents were “bought”). Bauer cites Eusebius’s (much later) comment as reflective of a practice that had been operative earlier as well:

The encomium of Eusebius upon the Emperor Constantine (3.58) teaches us that Rome viewed it as an altogether legitimate practice in religious controversy to tip the scales with golden weights: “In his beneficent concern that as many as possible be won for the teaching of the gospel, the emperor also made rich donations there [in Phoenician Heliopolis] for the support of the poor, with the aim of rousing them even in this way to the acceptance of saving truth (123, [brackets] in Bauer).

The following two chapters trace the rhetoric in the orthodoxy-heresy debate, as well as the use of literature. Both parties use written documents, and each used whatever means possible to discredit their opponent, even to the extent of falsifying and/or destroying documents (160) and even modifying their own source documents to more clearly make their case (160, supported with several pages of illustration from the Odyssey!). The various polemical writings employed cannot be trusted to represent accurately the opponent’s position, and since the orthodox came to hold the privileged position, we have little from the heretics’ own pens even though they were the more prolific writers (194). The most extensive orthodox writer, Eusebius, is not to be trusted;
his “serious misuse of the superlative” (and other problems), says Bauer, “is sufficient to remove any inclination I might have to take such assertions seriously” (192). Other than his citations from other writers, little is useful; “we cannot establish any firm foothold on the basis of what Eusebius himself contributes” (192).

Traditional literature is treated next: the use of the OT as well as divergent gospels. “At that point there probably was no version of Christianity worthy of note that did not have at its disposal at least one written gospel, in which Jesus appears as the bearer and guarantor of that particular view” (203). Though the other gospels were accepted fairly early (especially Mark and Matthew), John’s gospel was viewed with suspicion in orthodox Rome almost from the start (208). It was rather the preferred gospel of the Gnostics and other heretics. “When the gospel canon was defined, which was to be valid for the entire church, Rome found itself overruled, to put it rather crudely” (212).27

When we come to the epistles, Paul is nearly irrelevant to early Roman orthodoxy, being the darling of many of the heretics (215–25). Bauer’s summary is worth citing.

Perhaps, as the situation developed, some would have preferred henceforth to exclude Paul completely…. But it was already too late for that. Rome (together with the “church,” which it led) had already accepted too much from the Apostle to the Gentiles, had appealed to him too often, suddenly to recognize him no longer…. 1 Corinthians had proved itself to be extremely productive for purposes of church politics in the hands of Rome….

… I am inclined to see the pastoral Epistles as an attempt on the part of the church unambiguously to enlist Paul as part of its anti-heretical front and to eliminate the lack of confidence in him in ecclesiastical circles…. The church raised up the Paul of orthodoxy by using [pseudonymous] means…. The price the Apostle of the Gentiles had to pay to be allowed to remain in the church was the complete surrender of his personality and historical particularity…. Whenever the “church” becomes powerful, the bottom drops out from under him and he must immediately give way to the celebrities from the circle of the twelve apostles…. To some extent Paul becomes influential only as part of the holy scriptures acknowledged in the church—not the personality of the Apostle to the Gentiles and his proclamation, but the word of Paul … whenever it is useful for the development and preservation of ecclesiastical teaching…. The introduction of the pastoral Epistles actually made the collection of Paul’s letters ecclesiastically viable for the very first time (225–28 passim).

Paul seems to fair quite poorly in the hands of Bauer’s early orthodoxy. This is largely because of his “as yet quite rudimentary organization of thought patterns” (234), but even more because of his plasticity and tolerance. Not only could he be used by so many diverse groups, he “scarcely knows what a heretic might be” (234). He knows that a lot of other Christians disagree with him—and that is fine with him. It is only the “most serious

---

27 This is a rather ironic statement in Bauer regarding the church which otherwise exercised such authoritarian power!
moral deviation” (235) that gets him upset. Even when he felt opposing positions to be “defective, he still did not detest and condemn them as heretical” (237).

What we have known since the fourth century as orthodoxy was originally the dominant form of Christianity only in Rome. Through generous financial “gifts” and persuasive correspondence, “Rome confidently extends itself eastward, tries to break down resistance and stretches out a helping hand to those who are like-minded, drawing everything within reach into the well-knit structures of ecclesiastical organization” (231). Rome is thus the winner who vanquishes heresy by superior ability, backed by financial and political resources.

Bauer concludes by reflecting that “it is indeed a curious quirk of history that western Rome was destined to begin to exert the determinative influence upon a religion which had its cradle in the Orient, so as to give it that form in which it was to achieve worldwide recognition” (240). None of the heretical forms of Christianity, be they Marcionite, Gnostic, or Montanist, “could have achieved such recognition” (240).

The essence, then, of Bauer’s thesis is two-fold: in the beginning there were many varieties of Christianity (i.e., not a single, unified set of beliefs that later became what we know as orthodoxy), and second, it was the victory of one party, the church of Rome, which established the official dogma, suppressing all other competing views.

Responses to Bauer

In a paper of this length it is obviously impossible to respond to a substantial book like Bauer’s. Rather I will briefly summarize some of the key responses that have been posed in some detail by others, both as a direction for further reading and as a summary of the verdict of the three-quarters century that has elapsed since Orthodoxy and Heresy was first published. In one sense this section might be viewed as superfluous since the professed purpose is a critique of Ehrman, not Bauer. It is justified, however, by the fact that Ehrman assumes the validity of Bauer’s thesis. If Bauer is not reliable, then Ehrman’s approach is cut off at the knees since he does not attempt to provide the level of

28 In regard to passages that seem to contradict this portrait of Paul, Bauer adds a footnote: “The thrust of the polemic in Phil. 3 and in Rom. 16.17–20 is not entirely clear—or in any event, can be interpreted in different ways—and may be left aside at this point” (236 n. 11). In other words, I ignore what isn’t convenient for my theory!


30 I give, for the most part, only the conclusions and do not attempt to detail all the supporting evidence in these critiques.
justification and documentation for his system as does Bauer. The most significant critiques of Bauer, in historical order, are the following.31


The first major critique of Bauer was Turner’s *The Pattern of Christian Truth*—the Bampton Lectures for 1954. The 500+ pages present Turner’s “equivalent” of Bauer’s study, but chapter two is an explicit critique of Bauer. His analysis follows Bauer’s geographical outline. In regards to Edessa he concludes that “the evidence is too scanty and in many respects too flimsy to support any theory so trenchant and clear-cut as Bauer proposes” and “his skepticism on many points of detail appears excessive” (45). Turning to Egypt he proposes that there is more literary evidence than Bauer has acknowledged (some of it unknown in Bauer’s day, but not all). “Most of the new discoveries have the effect of moving what we know of Alexandrine Christianity further to the right” (i.e., toward a more orthodox view). The greater probability is that the evidence Bauer examined is to be understood as representative of “splinter groups on the fringe of the Church” (57). All told, there is less evidence for Bauer’s thesis from Alexandria than from Edessa (59). Likewise in Asia Minor there is nothing which “supports the more daring features of Bauer’s reconstruction” (63). The picture Bauer draws of Corinth, Rome, and 1 Clement “is at best non-proven” (67). As will others who follow, Turner charges Bauer with a “misuse of the argument from silence. If we have no evidence for the fact, we can hardly offer any profitable conjecture about its alleged cause” (67). Turner’s final verdict is that Bauer’s “fatal weakness appears to be a persistent tendency to over-simplify problems, combined with the ruthless treatment of such evidence as fails to support his case” (79).

Betz, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity” (1965)

Although basically in agreement with Bauer’s approach, Betz has pointed out two significant problems. First, on Egypt, Bauer got it wrong: there was a strong Gnostic presence, but that is not the only form of Christianity seen there. Second, he ignored the NT evidence; in particular, he “clearly underestimates Paul’s fight against his opponents. Bauer overlooks the fact that Paul claims to be ‘orthodox.’ Wherever Paul argues in his

---

31 For broad-ranging surveys of reviews published since 1934, see the articles by Harrington and Desjardins listed in the bibliography. For a review of earlier responses to the German edition, see Strecker’s article listed in n. 19. One major source which should have been included here, but which arrive via InterLibrary Loan the day this paper had to be submitted (and could thus not be read and summarized in time), is Jerry Flora, “A Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer’s Theory of Early Christian Orthodoxy and Heresy,” Th.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972.

letters, he does it to prove that his theological understanding is in accordance with the kerygma itself.”33


Chapman’s review article was published prior to the release of the English translation of Bauer.34 He poses two major criticisms: numerous arguments from silence (“habitually sees many gaps in our records as significant or ominous”), and “habitually coercing ambiguous pieces of evidence” to fit a preconceived theory (567). Bauer is also overly skeptical of Eusebius and other Fathers who defend the traditional view, yet “gives immediate and weighty credence to the slightest reference by the church fathers to widespread or predominating heresy” (567; he later uses the phrase “Eusebius demythologized,” 569). Chapman also rejects Bauer’s portrait of “power politics and sociological pressures” emanating from Rome, suggesting instead that we ought to consider the possibility that the victory of orthodoxy is related to providence: “certain broad lines of interpretation may have triumphed because of their theological adequacy” (572), though he realizes that “historians” have trouble dealing with such categories.

Heron, “The Interpretation of 1 Clement in Walter Bauer” (1973)

Rather than addressing the entire scope of Bauer’s thesis, most subsequent studies have focused on individual aspects of it. One of the first of these was Heron’s examination of Bauer’s use of 1 Clement: “The Interpretation of 1 Clement in Walter Bauer’s Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum.”35 A crucial aspect of Bauer’s thesis is the influence of Rome—the early orthodox “power broker” who forced her way into a dominant position over weaker churches and alternate interpretations of Christianity. It is this argument that Heron examines in considerable detail. He acknowledges that it appears “extremely attractive” due especially to it being clear, direct, and comprehensive. But this attractiveness is itself problematic:

Precisely because the whole interpretation is so plausible, one must immediately wonder whether its virtues of simplicity and comprehensiveness are to be attributed to Bauer’s discovery of the real significance of the events and developments he describes, or whether rather they reflect a desire to impose on the complexity of history an over-simplified pattern. Is the plausibility and attractiveness of the whole theory based upon its coherence with the available evidence, or is it rather based upon the power of Bauer’s synthesizing imagination?36

33 Betz, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity,” 306–08 (direct quote from 308).
36 Ibid., 525.
Heron will conclude that the later is, unfortunately, the case. His first major criticism is that Bauer’s interpretation of 1 Clement is not based on 1 Clement. It is based, rather, on evidence drawn from elsewhere and from attempting to read between the lines in 1 Clement, assuming that the letter itself is in part designed to hide Rome’s true message and motive (526). “He has explained—indeed, explained away—all those elements in I Clement which might seem to weigh against his interpretation, which he opposes to the meaning which Clement prefers to suggest” (i.e., what a plain reading the text of 1 Clement itself would seem to say).

In more specific terms, Heron argues that there is no evidence that Rome succeeded in imposing a monarchical bishop on Corinth, nor that they bribed the leaders of the opposition in Corinth. Even more seriously, Bauer’s assumption that Rome’s motive is not love and concern (as 1 Clement seems to suggest), but a power move to extend orthodoxy is unsupported; Bauer can only adduce this by reading back evidence from a century or more later (529–30). Nor will Bauer’s hypothesis stand that the real issue in Corinth is that of an orthodox minority being ousted by a Gnosticizing majority. Although an appealing and plausible suggestion, “the evidence which is given to show that it is in fact what did happen is remarkably tenuous, and is drawn almost exclusively not only from evidence other than that of I Clement, but from evidence which relates to events and developments which all took place in places or at times more or less remote from Corinth 95–96” (530). Bauer’s suggestions that 2d century writers who refer to 1 Clement understand that letter to relate to the question of orthodoxy versus heresy is likewise “exceedingly doubtful” (536; see 533–36).

Heron concludes that,

Bauer’s whole interpretation of I Clement is … rather less satisfactorily buttressed by convincing evidence than one might wish…. It need hardly be said that when all the components of an argument are as weak as those we have to deal with here, the argument as a whole, however plausible or attractive in itself it may appear, cannot be taken very seriously…. 

… The theory as a whole indeed depends more on his powers of imagination than on the facts available to us.37

After then devoting the following eight pages to a positive study of the relevant issues in 1 Clement, Heron reiterates that “attractive, and in itself plausible as his interpretation of I Clement is, it cannot be regarded as anything more than an interesting but improbable speculation” (545).

Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Egypt* (1977)

One of the most detailed studies of Egyptian Christianity, particularly the strange silence regarding it prior to AD 200, is Roberts’ *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early

37 Ibid., 536, 537.
Christian Egypt—\(^{38}\) the Schweich Lectures for the British Academy in 1977. His purpose is not primarily a critique of Bauer; that is a secondary outcome in the second half of the book. In contrast to Bauer’s query as to where the evidence is for orthodoxy in the 2d century, Roberts asks why there is no trace of either orthodoxy or heresy; there are hardly any traces of Christianity in any form. But there is some and Roberts proceeds to sort through the available evidence, beginning with the papyri and evidence within various documents (such as nomina sacra). His conclusion is that the silence has little to do with the prevalence of Gnosticism, but rather that Egyptian, and in particular Alexandrian Christianity originally remained more tightly connected to the Jewish community in Alexandria than it had in other parts of the empire, and apparently on better terms with their nonchristian Jewish neighbors. Few Gentiles apparently became part of the church there, so it retained a strongly Jewish flavor, even after AD 70. Only when the Jewish community in Egypt was nearly exterminated during the Jewish revolt there (AD 115–17) does Christianity begin to evidence itself distinctly.

We may surmise that for much of the second century it was a church with no strong central authority and little organization; one of the directions in which it developed was certainly Gnosticism, but a Gnosticism not initially separated from the rest of the Church. It was the teaching and personality of the two Gnostic leaders, Basilides and Valentinianus, that impressed the Christian world outside Egypt and were remembered, but this is not the whole story…. [eventually] the line between Gnostic and Catholic Christianity was more sharply drawn; but in Egypt, as can be seen in Clement and Origen, the process was slow and distinctions sometimes remained blurred.\(^{39}\)

Frederick Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement” (1976)

Although Norris accepts Bauer’s negative thesis (his critique of the traditional, orthodox theory of the origin of heresy), he argues that Bauer’s positive theses are not defensible; that is, his reconstruction of how things did happen in the 2d century. Bauer’s explanations of the events related to Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement are invalid. Much of this failure is Bauer’s frequent arguments from silence, but

his basic error is in reading history backwards, either by demanding that the fullest or even ‘ideal’ stage of a development must be present at its beginning in order for it to exist, or by imposing later events on earlier ones to support his interpretations. Frankly, he misreads the texts. One should be cautious in following his lead in places where there are few texts and


\(^{39}\) Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt, 71–72. The description of the church there as de-centralized and less organized can be confirmed and documented in some detail from Pearson, Gnosticism and Christianity, 18–20, who depends on Attila Jakab, Ecclesia Alexandria, 2d ed. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 176–77.
much silence, when it can be demonstrated that he does not proceed on good grounds with
the existent texts.40

McCue, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians” (1979)

Related to Roberts’ study of Egyptian Christianity, McCue, in his article “Orthodoxy
and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians,” debated Bauer’s handling of the
Valentinian Gnostic data.41 He argues that “Bauer is simply wrong” (119) since he
overlooks three key points regarding Valentinianism:

1) The orthodox play a role in Valentinian thought such that they seem to be part of the
Valentinian self-understanding. 2) This reference often suggests that the orthodox are the
main body, and at several points explicitly and clearly identifies the orthodox as the many
over against the small number of Valentinians. 3) The Valentinians of the decades prior to
Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria use the books of the orthodox New Testament in a
manner that is best accounted for by supposing that Valentinianism developed within a mid-
second century matrix (120).

McCue’s subsequent discussion documents these three points from the Valentinians
own statements. Points one and two, in particular, validate Yamauchi’s claim that
“Gnosticism always appears as a parasite…. ’it is always built on earlier, pre-existing
religions or on their traditions.’”42


By far the most detailed analysis of Bauer’s work is Robinson’s The Bauer Thesis
Examined.43 In this carefully argued work he proposes that “Bauer’s understanding of
orthodoxy and heresy does not provide the kind of insight into the character of earliest
Christianity that is widely attributed to it” (27). In contrast to Bauer’s thesis that heresy
was early and dominant, Robinson concludes that “it is the catholic community, not the
gnostic, that represents the character of the majority in western Asia Minor in the early
period” (203). To support this conclusion, he first sketches the history of the debate (ch.
1—it was, after all, a dissertation in its original form! ☺). Robinson addresses one of the
unique features of Bauer’s approach: the geographical treatment of the question of heresy

40 Frederick W. Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered,” in Orthodoxy,
York: Garland, 1993), 257; originally published in Vigiliae Christianae 30 (1976): 23–44 (quote above from
p. 43).
41 James F. McCue, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians,” Vigiliae Christianae
42 Edwin M. Yamauchi, Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences,” 2d ed. (Grand
Rapids: Baker, 1983), 185, citing in part, H. Drijvers, “The Origins of Gnosticism as a Religious and
Decker, *Rehabilitating Heresy*, BFS 2007, p. 17

in the early church. Bauer’s choice to begin with Edessa was deliberate since there he could make his strongest case. Robinson evaluates the evidence available from various areas, concluding that only Asia Minor can form an adequate basis for evaluating the orthodoxy-heresy debate—“no other area is remotely comparable” (41). The criteria for this judgment is two-fold: extensive literature, including literature that addresses the question of heresy. On this basis Bauer is faulted for placing the greatest weight on two areas, Edessa and Egypt, that have neither feature—the evidence there is scanty and ambiguous, to say nothing of the fact that neither was a primary center of the early church (42). The other potential areas (Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome) are not satisfactory either.44

Robinson then turns to the one area which provides the primary data unavailable elsewhere—Asia Minor. After examining the importance and character of Ephesus and western Asia Minor (ch. 3), he turns to a detailed evaluation of Bauer (chs. 4 and 5). “Bauer’s detective work—never dull, sometimes ingenious, occasionally brilliant—suffers from defects more serious than the sporadic overstatements and tendentious claims…. Far more fundamental and less easily corrigible, the defects of Bauer’s argument are structural” (129). These structural defects include,

(1) the hypothetical alliance of “ecclesiastically oriented” Paulinists with Palestinian immigrants against Gnosticizing Paulinists; (2) the alleged strength of heresy in the area; and (3) the proposed cause for the rise of the monarchical episcopate (129–30).

The final verdict is that,

Bauer’s reconstruction of the history of the early church in western Asia Minor is faulty—not just in minor details—but at critical junctures. For one thing, the thesis does not adequately explain the alliance between Palestinian immigrants and antignostic Paulinists; for another, it does not recognize the early consciousness of orthodoxy that might be indicated by such a shift. Further, it has failed to explain how a browbeaten orthodox minority could have so radically altered the structure of power in their favour. Finally, and most significantly, it has not demonstrated that heresy was as widespread and strong as Bauer had contended. In light of these weaknesses, Bauer’s reconstruction of primitive Christianity in western Asia Minor must, to a large measure, be set aside.

44 Edessa, in particular, is problematic in that “our information is too ambiguous or mute to allow us confident reconstructions of Christianity in this area” (58). Egypt, likewise: “the scarcity of the materials from Egypt results in suspicious gaps in the logic of these various reconstructions” (64). Corinth may sound more promising, but beyond 1 and 2 Corinthians, we have only one document for late 1st and early 2d century: 1 Clement, which is “a less detailed and considerably more ambiguous momentary glimpse of that church from a person who seems not to have had first-hand acquaintance with the church there. That makes for inventive, untestable, and not necessarily accurate hypotheses” (77). Rome is unfruitful since we have too little information to determine the original form of Christianity there (81), and the literary evidence is meager as it relates to Rome itself and none of it addresses the question of heresy (81–84). We have no literary evidence for either Jerusalem or Antioch in the relevant period (84–87, 88–91).
But the setting aside of Bauer’s reconstruction of the early church in western Asia Minor points to something more seriously flawed about the Bauer Thesis. The failure of the Bauer Thesis in western Asia Minor is not merely one flaw in an otherwise coherent reconstruction. The failure of the thesis is the only area where it can be adequately tested casts suspicion on the other areas of Bauer’s investigation. Extreme caution should be exercised in granting to the Bauer Thesis insight into those areas for which inventive theses appear credible only because evidence is either too scarce or too mute to put anything to the test (204).

Desjardins, “Bauer and Beyond” (1991)

A helpful synthetic response to Bauer’s work is Michel Desjardins’ article, “Bauer and Beyond.”\(^45\) Much of the article consists of digesting and evaluating the work of others, but in so doing he synthesizes these other studies in a helpful way. He approves Robinson’s arguments “on the whole” as being “well-taken and well-argued,” concluding that Robinson has added “another row of nails to the coffin enclosing Bauer’s thesis.”\(^46\) Desjardins’ primary contribution relates to the meaning of αἵρεσις. He suggests that Bauer has asked the wrong question. Instead of asking whether orthodoxy or heresy came first (Bauer’s question), one should ask “what αἵρεσις actually meant for first and second-century writers.”\(^47\) He seems to endorse Cohen’s suggestion that heresy was not a category invented by early orthodoxy as Bauer assumes, but arises from the church’s OT heritage, reflecting similar categories as the rabbis. The “common use of scripture and belief in one God possibly led [the Jewish rabbis and the early church] independently to notions of unity, oneness, and exclusivity.”\(^48\) This has obvious implications in support of a more traditional view in which orthodoxy is original and heresy later and derivative.


Although not formally a critique of Bauer’s work, Pearson’s study examines in considerable detail one of the key geographical areas on which Bauer’s thesis is founded. I do not accept some of Pearson’s dates or interpretations, but he has provided a very helpful survey of the documentary evidence for Christianity in 2d and 3d century Egypt. He clearly demonstrates that there was diversity present, yet he rejects Bauer’s explanation that heresy was original and dominant. He cites in particular *The Preaching of Peter*, an early 2d century pseudepigraphal writing that reflects traditional, “orthodox” Christianity. Since this is the earliest such documentary evidence available, it carries

\(^46\) Ibid., 72.
\(^47\) Ibid., 72, see also 78.
\(^48\) Ibid., 77.
considerable weight in the discussion. Pearson comments that “Bauer ignores this important work, which would have been detrimental to his theory.”


One of the more recent critiques of Bauer comes in Davidson’s history of the early church. He concludes that Bauer has ignored the evidence of theological diversity with the Roman church itself, and that Rome’s “political” influence over other churches only developed slowly; they were surely not in a position to repress their peers when Christianity was still an illegal religion (as it was until the 4th century). Nor does Bauer give sufficient credit to the influence of the Jerusalem church as the “mother church” which specified key matters of doctrine and practice (158).

Above all, however, Bauer’s theory overlooks the degree to which there clearly was from the beginning a certain set of convictions about Jesus that bound a majority of believers together, and it underestimates the intrinsic impetus that existed within these convictions to work out the logical parameters within which the gospel and its advocates could be said to exist. The process of discerning truth and falsehood that evolved in the late first and second centuries was implicitly grounded in the attempts by the first followers of Jesus to think through the consequences of their newfound faith with regard to personal salvation and practical living.

Summary of Responses

Following his own survey of previous studies, Harrington concludes that “Bauer’s reconstruction of how orthodoxy triumphed remains questionable.” It would seem that a stronger statement is justified. Hurtado’s judgment is correct:

Over the years … important studies have rather consistently found Bauer’s thesis seriously incorrect…. In fact, about all that remains unrefuted of Bauer’s argument is the observation, and a rather banal one at that, that earliest Christianity was characterized by diversity, including serious differences of belief. Those who laud Bauer’s book, however, obviously prefer to proceed as if much more of his thesis is sustainable. Unfortunately, for this preference, Bauer’s claims have not stood well the test of time and critical examination.

---

49 Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 16 n. 18. This work is described as lying “on a trajectory leading to the mainline Christianity of Clement” (16; see also 44).


Or as Bock asks, “if the two central Baurian positions are flawed [diverse origins and Roman influence], why does the overall thesis stand?”⁵³ We might rather conclude with Altendorf that Bauer has posed a “konstruktive Phantasie” or a “elegant ausgearbeitete Fiktion” (i.e., a constructive fantasy of the author and an elegantly worked-out fiction).⁵⁴

**Ehrman’s Lost Christianities**

After this lengthy excursus on Walter Bauer, it is time to return to one of the modern tributaries that have flowed from Bauer’s spring. Bart Ehrman’s position was summarized in the introduction to this essay; this section will spell out the argument of his key book on the subject, *Lost Christianities*. The summary will, of necessity, be selective. The purpose is not to provide a complete digest nor a detailed, point-by-point refutation.

**The Argument of Ehrman’s Lost Christianities**

Part one consists of four chapters, each dealing with “apocryphal” material: The Gospel of Peter, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, The Coptic Gospel of Thomas, and The Secret Gospel of Mark.⁵⁵ These represent, claims Ehrman, examples of ancient alternate portraits of Jesus and Christianity. He classes all of them as forgeries, suggesting that most of the “lost books” are just that—but so too are some which made it into the canon (e.g., the Pastoral Epistles and 2 Peter). The purpose and value of this chapter is questionable. All they serve to do is illustrate NT apocryphal writings—this is nothing new, though it may alarm the layman (or uninformed student or pastor). The implication, however, is that these are part of the conspiracy to conceal the truth about the early history of Christianity: “heretical” groups “were eventually reformed or repressed, their traces covered over, until scholars in the modern period began to rediscover them and to recognize anew the rich diversity and importance of these lost Christianities” (11).

⁵⁴ Hans-Dietrich Altendorf, “Zum Stichwort: Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 80 (1969): 64, cited by Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 50. (Altendorf’s article has not been accessible to me; according to Bock, the first description relates to Bauer’s arguments from silence, the second refers to his view of the Roman’s church’s relation to Corinth in 1 Clement.)
⁵⁵ The last of these is a modern forgery by Morton Smith. Ehrman tentatively suggests that this might be possible, but does not commit either way. In any event, it is an irrelevant chapter and serves only to add a sensational element to his book. For an account of the debate surrounding Smith’s forgery, see Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005). The original publication of this “discovery” may be found in Morton B. Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Whether intended as a scholarly gag or as an attempted justification for homosexuality (this so-called gospel portrays Jesus as a homosexual who has sex with the men he baptized), is unclear. Ehrman does comment in an endnote that Smith was gay… (*Lost Christianities*, 267 n. 19). Two additional scholarly refutations (neither of which I have seen) are Jacob Neusner, *Are There Really Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels? A Refutation of Morton Smith* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) and Harman Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000) who calls it “an ironic gay joke” (88)—both citations from Ehrman’s endnote, which includes several other bibliographic references.
The second part of Ehrman’s book sketches the history and beliefs of representative “heretics”—though Ehrman would not call them that; for him, they are simply “lost Christianities,” for the rediscovery of which we are indebted to the work of modern scholars—and to postmodern inclusivistic tolerance. This statement is not intended as a judgmental one for Ehrman himself could say it in just these terms. He begins by painting a rosy picture of the early Roman empire in which multiple religions peacefully coexisted despite contradictory practices (he does not say “beliefs”).

Multiplicity bred respect and, for the most part, plurality bred tolerance. No one had the sense that if they were right to worship their gods by the means appropriate to them, you were therefore wrong to worship your gods by the means appropriate to them…. Worship never involved accepting or making doctrinally acceptable claims about a god…. What mattered were traditionally sanctioned acts of worship, not beliefs (91–92).

Apparently the Romans would have been right at home in our pluralistic, tolerant, politically-correct, 21st century. But that is just where any form of orthodox Christianity is not welcome. Ehrman says this was the case in the first century also: “Christians by their very nature became exclusivists,” and thus everybody else was wrong (92).

The three chapters that comprise part two describe four trajectories across early Christianity: Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, and the proto-orthodox. Their description is set within a context of the considerable variation and contradiction found within the Christianities (again, note the significance of the plural) of the NT: Pauline versus Matthean versus Petrine versus Judaistic, etc. The function of the two chapters describing the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics is to portray alternate visions of what Christianity might have been if they had been victorious in the war with orthodoxy.56

---

56 I will assume that these three are generally familiar to my readers. If not, Ehrman’s description is generally serviceable, if somewhat selective. See also Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 523–48 (Gnosticism) and 549–57 (Marcion); he also discusses the variety of theological emphases in the NT, but in terms of confluence, not contradiction. His discussion is focused particularly on one aspect of Christology (devotion to Jesus), so this is not a comprehensive treatment, but it serves as a recent representative of scholarship that reaches conclusions quite different from Ehrman regarding similar issues. On all three groups, there is an introductory discussion in Oskar Skarsaune, In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 203–06 [Ebionites], 243–253 [Gnosticism], and 254–56 [Marcion]. There is no end to the bibliography on Gnosticism; the standard bibliography is David M. Scholer, Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948–1969, Nag Hammadi Studies 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), updated annually in Novum Testamentum. In particular, see the collection of essays in David Scholer, ed., Gnosticism in the Early Church, Studies in the Early Church 5 (New York: Garland, 1993). For an introductory discussion set in the context of Bauer’s proposals, see Bock, Missing Gospels, 15–31. For Marcion, there is an introductory survey in Brown, Heresies, 60–66. The classic study is Adolf von Harack, Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott [= Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God] (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921). See also “Marcion in Contemporary Views: Results and Open Questions,” in Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Schism in Early Christianity, ed. E. Ferguson, 259–81 (New York: Garland, 1993). There is less discussion of the Ebionites in English; the most detailed studies of which I am aware are the following: Glenn A. Koch, “A Critical Investigation of Epiphanius’ Knowledge of the Ebionites: A Translation and Critical Discussion
They are presented, Gnosticism in particular, as having a “powerful message” that was “obviously attractive” (133). Ehrman’s summary is “that these precious systems of belief and practice, these alternatives forms of Christianity, had a lot to say to the world of antiquity, and evidently they have a lot to say to people even today, given the fascination about Gnosticism among those interested in early Christianity” (134). Thankfully, “some of their texts [have] reappeared by sheer serendipity in modern times” (134).

Chapter seven provides Ehrman’s description of a “broad swath” that he designates as proto-orthodoxy. This is the form of Christianity that was to prove victorious and which therefore determined “the most familiar features of what we think of today as Christianity” (136), including the content of the NT, the church hierarchy, the sacraments, and authorized beliefs (including Jesus’ two natures and the trinity, both viewed as creations by the church). The hierarchical emphasis is important since it guaranteed church order “by a rigid church structure, with one person at the top making the key decisions” (141). This was developed after Paul by the “aspiring author of one of his churches” in the Pastorals and especially by the Roman church, regarding which he paraphrases Bauer’s view of 1 Clement.

The third and final part of the book lays out Ehrman’s thesis regarding the struggle for dominance among the various Christianities in the 2d and 3d centuries. This is essentially Bauer redivivus. He does begin a bit earlier than Bauer, first sketching the “vitiolic attacks” by Paul on his opponents “with a vehemence unparalled,” with infuriated, “white-hot anger” (160–61).

The first chapter in this section sketches the traditional view of heresy (that orthodoxy came first, followed by deviations from that original, correct standard) as seen in their classical expression in Eusebius, which is, of course, driven by a theological agenda (in contrast to historical accuracy) with “more vitriol than substance”: opposition to any alternative understanding of the faith. The result is “a remarkably sanguine picture” of the first three centuries of Christianity in which “the church grew despite opposition. And ‘heresy’ was quickly and effectively overcome by the original and apostolic teaching of the church’s vast majority.” Although Eusebius was the primary advocate of this explanation, he was not the first since the same view can be found in the NT book of Acts, and since that was afforded canonical status, it became the standard view of the proto-orthodox in the 2d and 3d centuries (164, 167).
This classical view was first challenged by Reimarus and F. C. Bauer (18th and 19th centuries, respectively). Once the historical accuracy of the Gospels (Reimarus) and of Acts (F. C. Bauer) has been challenged, we learn that these sources “cannot be used uncritically to provide a historical basis for the classical understanding of orthodoxy and heresy” (172). It was not until Walter Bauer’s “devastating attack on [Eusebius’] portrayal of early Christian unity and diversity” (173) that we have finally learned the truth. Ehrman then summarizes Bauer’s argument from Orthodoxy and Heresy, describing it as a major accomplishment that succeeded in rewriting early Christian history. He acknowledges problems with specific details, yet since “subsequent scholarship has tended to show even more problems with the Eusebian understanding of heresy and orthodoxy and has confirmed that, in their essentials, Bauer’s intuitions were right” (176).

As a result of this ongoing scholarship, it is widely thought today that proto-orthodoxy was simply one of many competing interpretations of Christianity in the early church. It was neither a self-evident interpretation nor an original apostolic view. The apostles, for example, did not teach the Nicene Creed or anything like it. Indeed, as far back as we can trace it, Christianity was remarkably varied in its theological expressions (176).

In the remainder of the chapter Ehrman offers his own contribution to support Bauer’s thesis; he titles the section, “In Support of Bauer’s Basic Thesis: A Modern Assessment of Early Christian Diversity” (176). He offers two points in this chapter (ch. 8), with a broader discussion of some other issues in chapters 9–11. Here he suggests that the proto-orthodox writers themselves prove that Bauer was right. He does this by tracing the references in the NT to false teachers that are attacked by the writers (Paul in Galatians, Corinthians, Romans; pseudonymous Paul in Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy; James, Revelation, Jude, and 2 Peter). Despite Eusebius’ claim that these earlier writings show that the proto-orthodox won, “these ‘successes’ presuppose the extensive, even pervasive, influence of false teachers in the early Christian communities” (176). Ehrman considers it extremely important that all these opponents “identify themselves as followers of Christ…. understanding themselves to be Christian, maintaining that their views were not only believable but right…. In some cases, possibly most, they may have claimed to represent views held by Jesus’ own apostles, the original Christian views” (177–78).

His second point in chapter 8 is that the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy were blurry in early Christianity. He acknowledges that monotheism and the incarnation were “clear battle lines,” but the exact nature of Jesus’ humanity was “not yet well defined.” As evidence he points to some of the unusual ideas about Jesus’ body that were held by Origen and Clement of Alexandria—ideas that would not pass muster at Nicaea in later years. The logic is, if those in the proto-orthodox camp believed unorthodox doctrines, then there must have been very broad boundaries in the early centuries, much
broader than the orthodoxy that was created in the 4th century. This broad diversity, of course, proves that there were originally many divergent Christianities.

In chapter 9 Ehrman recounts some of the controversy between opposing groups. He first summarizes Ebionite protests against the Pauline view (182–84). This is based on the Pseudo-Clementine literature (the Homilies and the Recognitions) which is said to record Ebionite views presented as those of Peter against the arch-heretic, Simon Magus—who is a foil for Paul. In this case, the argument is for the continued necessity of observing the Law, advocated by Peter, in contrast to the “lawless” doctrine of Paul. Ehrman then moves to the Gnostic polemic against proto-orthodoxy. This plays out a bit differently than might be expected. Rather than charging the other side with outright error, the Gnostic claim is that proto-orthodoxy was merely superficial. There was deeper, spiritual meaning in the plain texts and events of the NT. The Gnostics reinterpreted these events in accord with their own *gnosis*, which is what gave them their “spiritually elite” status (185). The examples cited come from the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and from the Second Treatise of the Great Seth.

The last half of the chapter then discusses seven common themes in the attack by the proto-orthodox heresiologists (189–202). 1) Unity and diversity: if there is not agreement, something is wrong (and there was great diversity within Gosticism). 2) Sense and nonsense: beliefs that are not logical are wrong (though Ehrmans suggests that Gnostic myth was mistaken for propositional statement). 3) Truth and error: heresy is a perversion of pre-existing truth. 4) Apostolic succession: everything must be traceable back to the apostles. 5) Rule of faith and creeds: the *regula fidei* and later the creeds define truth. 6) Interpretation of Scripture: literal interpretation of the text is primary; figurative interpretations only used to support truth established on literal grounds (Marcion and the Gnostics emphasized figurative, allegorical interpretations). 7) Charges of reprobate activity: traditional rhetoric accused the heretics of immorality: false teaching is matched by promiscuity.

---

57 I will not comment on this argument later since it deals with a great deal of material that I have only browsed and am not competent at this point to judge accurately. It seems to me that Ehrman’s account is a strange mixture of Ehrman’s views regarding Peter and Paul and his account of the pseudo-Clementine literature so that Ehrman makes this literature appear to be a legitimate historical portrait and even evidence which supports his own reconstruction (including the conclusion—or at least “suspicion”—that Paul “lost” the debate with Peter referenced in Galatians 2). This whole section would be a profitable topic for further research.

58 This is a poor choice of terminology since it seems that it is related to continuity of teaching rather than of office. Ehrman seems to blend them together.

59 At this point Ehrman uses what he considers an extreme, shocking case: the charges by Epiphanius of orgiastic and cannibalistic practices of a Gnostic group. Ehrman asks rhetorically, “Can this tale of unbridled lust and ritual cannibalism be true?” (200). He is clear that Epiphanius certainly can’t be trusted on this point; the accusations are fabricated for rhetorical, heresiological purposes and have no basis in reality. The picture is quite grotesque and offensive to our sensibilities—and Ehrman spares no details in his (deliberately) shocking portrait. It is quite interesting, however, that Stephen Gero has documented just
Forgeries are the subject of chapter 10. Ehrman uses this term rather than the more common “pseudonymous”—perhaps for dramatic effect since it sounds worse. He credits both the heretics and the proto-orthodox with such forgeries, some of which have no theological agenda (though at that point one might wonder how they are attributed to one camp or the other!) and others have a clear theological agenda. As examples of the later, the Proto-Gospel of James is summarized as a proto-orthodox forgery intended to defend the perpetual virginity of Mary (207–10).60

The more serious charge relates to the “falsification of sacred texts” (215–27). “This involved not the creation of ‘new’ (i.e., forged) documents in the names of the apostles but the falsification of writings that had already been produced, that is the alteration of the wording of documents held to be sacred, in order to make them more clearly oppose ‘false’ teachings and more clearly support ‘correct’ ones” (215). In other words, the proto-orthodox doctored the text of the NT to make it support their preconceived theological positions (217). This chapter is but a summary of Ehrman’s two book-length treatments on the subject, his technical work The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, and the popular version Misquoting Jesus.61 Space does not allow much of a summary here; one example will suffice. The change in Luke 2:33 from ἦν ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ θαυμάζοντες (his father and mother were marveling) to the later (i.e., Byzantine) reading ἦν Ἰωσὴφ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ θαυμάζοντες (Joseph and his mother were marveling) “caused some consternation among proto-orthodox scribes” (222) since it could be read as an adoptionistic text. Therefore they deliberately changed the text to support their doctrine of the virgin birth.

such a practice in a Gnostic group: “With Walter Bauer on the Tigris: Encratite Orthodoxy and Libertine Heresy in Syro-Mesopotamian Christianity,” in Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity, ed. C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr., 287–307 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986). If this is valid for the Borborites, perhaps Epiphanius may be right about the Phibionites! We may be repulsed by the description, but that does not make it unhistorical or inaccurate. Ehrman’s only evidence against Epiphanius’ charge (other than his rhetorical, “it couldn’t be true”) is that the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic documents consistently lean toward an ascetic emphasis (201). But despite his claim that Nag Hammadi represents a “bewildering variety” of Gnostic schools, there are only about four dozen texts involved (for an overview of the library, see William Combs, “Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and New Testament Interpretation,” GTJ 8 [1987]: 195–212). If these documents originate from a monastery several miles away (which is not certain, though often suggested), then one would expect them to focus on texts which supported an ascetic lifestyle rather than more libertine forms of Gnosticism. In other words, Nag Hammadi may not be widely representative of Gnosticism.

60 Interestingly, there is no discussion of “heretical forgeries” in this chapter, though they are mentioned in passing (204).

The final chapter in Ehrman’s argument (ch. 11) carries an interesting title: “The Invention of Scripture” (229). The argument here is that the proto-orthodox created an authorized corpus as a weapon in their defense against heresy. The heretics were then refuted because their teachings were not found in that corpus—which, of course, had been deliberately created to accomplish just that. The chapter traces the centuries-long process by which the NT was formed, none of the books of which were written by any of the twelve apostles, though if Paul’s claim to being an apostle is legitimate, we do have one “apostolic” author (though only for 7 of the 13 “Pauline” epistles). “But if the term [apostolic] is taken in a broader sense to mean ‘book that contains apostolic teaching as defined by the emerging proto-orthodox church,’ then all twenty-seven pass muster” (236). Thus rather than the church being created by Scripture, Ehrman has Scripture being the creation of the church.

The conclusion (ch. 12) muses on what might have been different if one of these (equally valid) alternative Christianities had won rather than proto-orthodoxy. That victory has been extremely influential even in such basic things, claims Ehrman, as the way we read and understand texts such as the newspaper. Had the mystic approaches of the Gnostics prevailed, our epistemology and our world view would be drastically different (248–49). Thankfully, thinks Ehrman, we have outgrown the intolerance of proto-orthodoxy since “times have changed, and changed with them has been a sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable in religious dialogue.” Christians today (at least many of them) “are less inclined than their proto-orthodox forebears to condemn those who disagree with [their cherished religious views]” (256). Our modern rediscovery of these early, alternative, “lost Christianities” is not antiquarian, since they “can be cherished yet today [and] provide insights even now for those of us who are concerned about the world and our place in it” (257).

Response to Ehrman

Despite the implications of the Bauer/Ehrman hypothesis, at some points it can strike a responsive cord. They delight in criticizing “orthodoxy” and its later developments and

---


63 This statement is not intended to deny that God is the creator of the church. The point is that the Scriptures are not a human invention—it was not the “proto-orthodox” church which determined the content of the NT. The church sits, rather, under the authority of Scripture and seeks to form itself and its ministry in accord with the dictates of Scripture. In its earliest, first-century form, the NT canon was not complete, thus the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20, in which the genitive [ἐπί τῶν θεμελίων τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν] might be intended to indicate source: the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets). Regardless, it was God’s design and purpose implemented initially through the apostles, then when available, though the Scriptures which produced the church. Ehrman’s formulations turn this relationship on its head.

64 Ehrman does not use the terms “epistemology” or “world view,” but those are the concepts he describes.
accretions imposed by ecclesiastical authority. Since the “orthodoxy” of Eusebius and of the Bauer/Ehrman hypothesis is essentially Roman Catholicism (albeit in nascent form in Eusebius—though Bauer/Ehrman often anachronistically assume the full development of later centuries), we can at times agree with some elements of the proffered critique. As “Protestants” we do not accept many aspects of Romanism and we often speak of recovering a pure, first-century form of Christianity. We certainly protest at the divergent forms of the original Christianities proposed by Bauer/Ehrman as well as the methodology and presuppositions employed, but we do resonate with the goal.65

As is obvious by comparing the summaries of Bauer and Ehrman, they both assume the same basic thesis regarding the origin of heresy and the history of early Christianity. Ehrman’s discussion ranges much more widely since his purpose is to create a sensationally different picture of the early church than that held by most Christians. His is neither a scholarly tome, nor a “pulp popularization” (as, e.g., Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*). It is much closer to the popular level than Bauer’s study, which is a dense book, heavily documented. It is probably best described as an introductory college-level text (as least of the sort preferred by many contemporary collegians!) or a book for those mythical readers whom publishers sometimes describe as the “informed layman.” It has not been nearly as popular as his best-seller, *Misquoting Jesus*, but has still sold a great many copies.66

---

65 We may not like all the implications of Jenkin’s assessment, but it is worth contemplating at this point: “This liberal approach strikingly recalls much older ideas, as reformers throughout history have commonly denied that they were wantonly innovating, claiming instead that they were restoring an idealized lost reality. A recurrent theme in Protestant history has been the quest for the idealized pure church of the primitive ages, which was distorted and eventually suppressed by ecclesiastical power: the search for restoration meant stripping away all the accretions of the centuries of Romanism and popery. In some cases, too, it meant reexamining and romanticizing various past heresies as the repositories of Christian truth, the groups that had kept the gospel alive through the grim millennium of unchallenged papal power. In Protestant mythology, the long Catholic night was brightened by the existence of heresies such as the medieval Waldenses and Lollards, groups who insisted on reading the Bible in their native tongues. Ever since the Reformation, some Protestants have looked longingly at the Celtic churches of British Isles as bastions of anti-Roman resistance. A few reformers even looked to the Cathars or Albigensians of the thirteenth century, whose starkly unorthodox theology posited an eternal battle between the forces of spirit and matter, light and darkness, and who can only by a generous stretch of language even be termed Christian. Nevertheless, these medieval Manichaeans were sometimes depicted, however optimistically, as proto-Protestants” (*Hidden Gospels*, 107–08).

66 Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* was at one point the number two book on the Amazon.com bestseller list. The current ranking for the paperback edition is 1,250. (Interestingly, the brand new title, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s “Misquoting Jesus”* by Timothy Jones [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007] is ranked at 8,721! Not bad. I have not yet seen this title.) The highest rating I’ve seen for *Lost Christianities* is 1,318—which given the number of titles listed by Amazon.com (around 2.5 million) is certainly to be judged a very popular book. The current ranking of the paperback edition is 9,708. For some unfathomable reason it seems to be more popular than that other magnificent treatise, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, which earlier this month was ranked at 711,202! ☺
It is a book that deserves a full length response, not necessarily a point-by-point refutation, but one which argues a convincing counter thesis in conversation with Ehrman (and Bauer).67 Obviously this paper is not that response! Rather I have selected several key points for comment, and will then move to a broader discussion of underlying issues.

The first observation relates to the basis of Ehrman’s story. It rests solidly on Bauer. In light of the responses to Bauer summarized earlier, one wonders what is left on which Ehrman can build. He does acknowledge that there have been some problems pointed out in Bauer:

Specific details of Bauer’s demonstration were immediately seen as problematic. Bauer was charged, for good reason, with attacking orthodox sources with inquisitorial zeal and exploiting to a nearly absurd extent the argument from silence. Moreover, in terms of his specific claims, each of the regions that he examined have been subjected to further scrutiny, not always to the advantage of his conclusions.

 Probably most scholars today think that Bauer underestimated the extent of proto-orthodoxy throughout the empire and overestimated the influence of the Roman church on the course of the conflicts. Even so, subsequent scholarship has tended to show even more problems with the Eusebian understanding of heresy and orthodoxy and has confirmed that, in their essentials, Bauer’s intuitions were right. If anything, early Christianity was even less tidy and more diversified than he realized.

As a result of this ongoing scholarship, it is widely thought today that proto-orthodoxy was simply one of many competing interpretations of Christianity in the early church.68

Several comments are in order. Some of this statement is valid. Ehrman recognizes that Bauer’s two key pillars have been challenged, proto-orthodoxy was early and more widespread, and Rome’s influence not nearly as great. In light of the studies summarized above, this could be stated much more strongly. The study of the specific geographic areas, especially Robinson’s study, appears to have made Bauer’s thesis untenable. In the two endnotes within the section cited above, Ehrman acknowledges specific instances of these matters (273 nn. 20, 21). How then can Ehrman conclude that “early Christianity was even less tidy and more diversified”? The evidence points the opposite direction.69 So, despite the evidence, the theory is still right.

67 The closest to such a book is Darrel Bock’s The Missing Gospels, but as helpful as that is, it is too close to the popular end of the spectrum. Craig Evans’ Fabricating Jesus is also helpful, but it is concerned more with “Jesus studies,” though ch. 9 does address Ehrman. What is needed are more substantial works. Many of the books that have been written in response to recent “media frenzies” also contribute to this need, though each is too narrowly focused to address Lost Christianities. These include Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, Reinventing Jesus; Porter and Heath, The Lost Gospel of Judas; Witherington, The Gospel Code; and (briefly) Wright, Judas and the Gospel of Jesus. (See the bibliography for these titles.)
68 Lost Christianities, 176.
69 Bock describes Ehrman’s conclusion at this point as schizophrenic! (Missing Gospels, 48).
At the least this would require Ehrman to provide substantial new evidence to replace the large chunks of Bauer that have been discredited. As noted above, he does attempt this in chapter 8 by proposing two new lines of argument. First, the writings of the proto-orthodox demonstrate the pervasive nature of alternate Christianities—the advocates of which viewed themselves to be the most accurate representatives of Jesus’ teaching. Second, the theological boundaries were blurry in the early church, especially in Christology. (The remaining chapters do not provide any additional evidence of Bauer’s thesis; they only flesh out the picture by interpreting the existing data in light of the theory.)

Pervasive Alternatives

In response to the first argument, what one claims for oneself does not establish truth. The validity of a claim to be a Christian is not an incorrigible belief. (One’s self-perception as being a Christian may be incorrigible, but that may be quite different from ontological reality; self-deception can be very real.) Thus even if the statements of the proto-orthodox are taken to justify the conclusion that heresy was early and dominant, that would not justify the conclusion that these individuals were more reliable representatives of Jesus’ original teaching.

The original conclusion need not be granted, however. Ehrman claims that the frequent references in Eusebius and in the NT to the successful deposing of false teachers “at every turn” presupposes “the extensive, even pervasive, influence of false teachers in the early Christian communities” (176). First, simply because early church leaders spoke often and vigorously against divergent views does not logically lead to the conclusion that divergence was dominant. Intensity of rhetoric does not translate to any particular estimate of numerical predominance. If someone has sufficiently strong convictions regarding a matter, the volume may be quite substantial if only one person advocated an opposing position. The potential danger of an idea and its implications were it adopted may justify such intensity if that idea is being advocated by an influential person. If that person appeared as a teacher of the church, it is not difficult to understand how Ehrman’s proto-orthodox church leaders (or apostles) might speak vigorously against that person’s ideas.

Second, one might ask just how extensive is the evidence? Ehrman does not cite any specifics from Eusebius and I have not read through that corpus looking specifically for this sort of statement (that might be a profitable task). But he does cite examples from the NT (177). Of what do they consist? Galatians—this is the most obvious example and it is clear that Paul is concerned lest his “children”71 (Gal 4:19) turn to a different gospel (1:6). Those who are “throwing them into confusion” (1:7) are a group of at least two (see the

---

71 τέκνα—and the context justifies the NIV’s “dear children.”
plural forms in 1:7; 4:17; 5:12; 6:12–13), though this might be a single teacher (5:10 uses a singular form: ὁ ταράσσω υμᾶς) with one or more others in agreement with him. The other reference to controversy in Galatians, Paul’s rebuke of Peter (2:11–14) is not—despite the common depiction to the contrary—a theological disagreement between Paul and Peter, but a question of applied theology. Peter was not acting consistently with his own theology, upon which he and Paul agreed.72 So there is one example of a “heresy” in the Galatian context.

Corinthians, the “problem church” of the NT, is also an obvious situation. Some of the issues there were also ethical (applied theology), but others were explicitly theological (e.g., those who denied the resurrection, 1 Cor 15:12). Some of the challenges were internal (15:12, “some of you”), others involved teachers from outside the group (2 Cor 11:4–5). The internal issues do not appear to be a matter of an “alternative Christianity,” but of the growing pains of a young church with some members bringing in some theological/philosophical baggage from previous associations and attempting to merge it with their new faith. Certainly their theology needed “adjustment,” but that was Paul’s responsibility as their teacher and as an apostle. If every such difference constituted another “Christianity,” then every church would have nearly as many varieties as members! But there was a real problem here with heresy; the outside teachers are rebuked in terms as strong as those used in Galatians (2 Cor 11:1–4). Whether this is the same group as previously sought to lead the Galatians away from apostolic faith cannot be determined.

These are the most obvious, specific examples. We have less information regarding some others, which span less serious matters to what would be called heresy. The Colossian “heresy” (as it is often called) is neither some form of classical philosophy nor Gnosticism, but rather a syncretistic attempt to blend their previous folk-religion with Christianity.73 It may be that a particular member of the church had begun advocating some such ideas (Col 2:16–20, note the singular ἑόρακεν in v. 18) and Paul again writes to clarify matters. It is not a “heretical movement” taking over the church. The issues, though important, do not seem nearly as serious as the Galatian or Corinthian situations. In Ephesus there were theological problems, but our information is sketchy (1 Tim 1:3–7) other than it involved myths, etc., apparently advocated by those who wanted to be teachers. Ehrman does not mention Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim 1:20), but these are those who once professed the faith they now deny (much like Ehrman himself?), so they do not represent an equally valid alternative Christianity. We also learn of others who “in the later days” will abandon the faith (4:1–5), but this situation is parallel with

---

72 There is reference in this same context to the “circumcision party” (2:12), but they are not equated with James or those that came from him. But that question is too involved for the present paper.
73 On this see Clint Arnold, The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae (WUNT 2.77, Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1995; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).
74 See his “testimony,” recounted at some length in Misquoting Jesus, 1–15.
Hymenaeus and Alexander. Whether it was only a future scenario or a present reality in Paul’s day we do not know. The summary statements in 6:3–5 are not heresiological rhetoric used to tar all heretics, but apply to the specific issue in Ephesus at the time. False teachers are also described in 2 Peter 2 and Jude, and that with fairly strong language. Likewise the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira (Rev 2:14–16, 20–24) tolerated false teaching in their midst. The Johannine epistles also refer to false Christological teaching (1 John 2:18–23; 4:1–6; 2 John 7–11).

But what does this survey suggest? Does it portray early Christianity as a movement that is divided into many competing Christianities, of which orthodoxy is only one small portion? Does false teaching predominate across the Christian world? There are only eight areas/letters included above: Galatia, Corinth, Colossae, Ephesus, 2 Peter, Jude, Pergamum, Thyatira, and the Johannine epistles (or nine if 1 and 2 John are counted separately). It might be possible to add a few more, but these are certainly the major ones. Eight areas where false teaching is documented in the NT, and that over a span of a half century, does not seem adequate to justify Ehrman’s conclusion.

As fundamentalists and separatists we do not want to minimize the seriousness of false teaching, but neither do we want to magnify it out of proportion. A preoccupation with what’s wrong (false teaching, heresy) can have unwanted consequences: an ineffective, introspective ministry and constant bickering and criticizing of others (in the case of some fundamentalists), or a very postmodern, pluralistic, “tolerant” view of heresy in the Bauer/Ehrman view of the early church—though Ehrman would view this as a positive focus on (legitimate) diversity rather than a negative.

Blurry Boundaries

Ehrman’s second proposed basis for his view of heresy is that the theological boundaries were quite blurry in the early church. This is not well-founded. His examples—and only two are cited—are not central doctrinal issues despite Ehrman’s portrayal of them. As related to his examples, the central theological issues in the early church are clear: the deity and humanity of Jesus. The details of these doctrines are not essential to the doctrine itself. Both of Ehrman’s examples are, relatively speaking, part of a peripheral issue: the nature of Jesus’ human body. We may think that Origen’s concept of Jesus’ body being able to change shapes to be odd, but Origen does affirm that he had a human body. We may think that Clement has attributed divine attributes to Jesus’

---

75 Other examples cited by Ehrman are invalid (2 Thess and James) or highly speculative (Romans). I realize that Ehrman would take issue with some of my descriptions, often because of his views of authorship and date of some of the writings that I have assumed.
humanity in claiming that Jesus did not need physical nourishment or in his statement of Jesus’ impassibility, but in doing so Clement does affirm both Jesus’ deity and humanity.76

No one (that I know of) claims that the early church understood all the technical details of Nicaea or Chalcedon.77 The Christology of the NT is clear and unambiguous as to Jesus’ deity and humanity. It is also clear that although there is one God, there are three distinct persons who are called God. The discussions of later times are logical/philosophical clarifications that hammer out the limits of what the NT data allows and disallows, what it implies and does not imply. Often these limits are developed in the context of debate over heresy. As various thinkers explore the implications of NT statements and attempt to flesh out the details, they may go too far. Not all implications of new doctrinal formulations are immediately obvious,78 but continued discussion and often controversy and debate enable more careful statements.

The lack of the later technical terminology and definitions in the NT and in the early centuries does not imply that there was no such thing as orthodoxy. If one defines orthodoxy as affirming the later particulars, then one must resort to terminology such as proto-orthodoxy for the earlier period. But that is not a necessary definition—or even a necessary term. Regardless of what we call it, there was a concept of theological truth already present in the NT—a standard by which one could determine “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6). The likely response from Ehrman, that this is only so because the later church “created” the NT and rewrote the texts and history to make it support their later views, will be considered below. For now, assuming the integrity and historicity of the NT text as we have it, consider this brief (and partial) survey, roughly in a chronological, Biblical theology sequence—and without a great deal of elaboration.79

Jas 3:1, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” This would assume some sort of standard by which an evaluation would be made. Granted that this likely refers to

---

76 A study of both passages cited by Ehrman (Origen, Sermon on the Mount 100 and Clement, Miscellanies 6.71.2) in their context, considering their purpose (and perhaps their adversaries), might be quite interesting, but I have not had time to do that for this paper.

77 There have been those who have claimed that the Apostles’ Creed was composed by the apostles (e.g., Ambrose of Milan, 4th century; or the Pseudo-Augustine tradition that places each phrase of that creed on the lips of a specific apostle), but I do not know of any modern scholars who would argue that there never was a non-creedal period in the church in any formal sense of the term “creed.” See the discussion in Arnold Ehrhardt, “Christianity Before the Apostles’ Creed,” Harvard Theological Review 55 (1962): 74–79.

78 As but one example, the terminology of inerrancy and infallibility might be rethought now more than a quarter century later. Though originally intended as synonyms, many latched onto infallibility as a “cover term” for denying inerrancy. The potential for the use of that term in its original setting was unforeseen by many. (If I remember correctly, Francis Schaeffer expressed concern about it when it was used at the Lausanne conference for just that reason, but I have not attempted to document this illustration.)

79 Scripture citations are from NIV unless noted otherwise.
future assessment by God, the teacher must still have some basis for self-evaluation in order to meet that standard. The evaluation is not a pedagogical one, but doctrinal. 

Gal 1:6–9, the “different gospel—which is really no gospel,” “the gospel of Christ,” and “a gospel other than the one we preached to you… other than what you accepted” must reference specific content. The good news is news about something. For two divergent messages to be contrasted, the readers must be able to distinguish the content of each. 

Gal 1:11–12, the gospel that Paul preached was received by revelation (δι᾽ ἀποκάλυψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). This is not an abstract “personal revelation” since it is contrasted with something that might have been taught (ἐδιδάχθη), thus it includes cognitive content that can be distinguished from other messages. 

2 Thess 2:15, “stand firm and hold to the traditions (παράδοσις) that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (ESV). These traditions, though perhaps including particular actions,\(^\text{80}\) is first of all a specific body of cognitive content that could be communicated (διδάσκω) orally or in writing (ἐίτε διὰ λόγου ἐίτε δι᾽ ἐπιστολῆς ήμῶν). Important in light of the present discussion, these teaching are to be maintained: they are to “stand firm and hold to” (στήκετε καὶ κρατεῖτε) them. There is a doctrinal standard that is to be maintained. 

1 Cor 16:13, “stand firm in the faith”; and 2 Cor 13:5, “examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.” Here the phrase “the faith” stands for Christian belief, which includes actions, but also belief—as the last phrase in the second text implies: “do you not realize that Christ is in you?”—an explicitly theological statement. 

Rom 16:17, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.” Here is specific didactic content—teaching (διδαχή)—that can be distinguished from other, incompatible teaching. 

1 Tim 1:3, “command certain ones not to teach different doctrine” (RD); ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω, “to teach other doctrine,” and in this context the ἑτερο- prefix probably does imply “different” (it does not always).\(^\text{81}\) But if this is so, then there is a standard against which this “difference” can be evaluated. This standard is also reflected in 1 Tim 4:6, “brought up in the truths of the faith (τοῖς λόγοις τῆς πίστεως ) and of the good teaching (καλῆς διδασκαλίας) that you have followed.” The contrast with false teachers appears again in 6:3, “if anyone teaches other doctrine and does not agree with sound words—the ones of our Lord Jesus Christ....” (RD). Here there

\(^\text{80}\) Paul had certainly taught the Thessalonians to do certain “Christian things”—pray, observe the ordinances, etc., as well as to live a distinctly Christian life style. Though perhaps not so “theological” as, say an affirmation of the deity of Jesus, this is, nonetheless, Christian theology. One cannot separate doing certain things from believing certain things; one believes that certain things are to be done—and what one believes affects how one lives. 

\(^\text{81}\) Danker defines ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω as “to teach contrary to standard instruction,” and suggests the gloss, “give divergent instruction” (BDAG, 399).
is not only a standard for evaluation, but it is explicitly identified to be the words of Jesus himself. Paul claimed that his teaching was the same as Jesus’ teaching. There was continuity between the dominical and the apostolic teaching.

2 Tim 1:13–14, “hold to the standard of sound words that you heard from me…. Protect the good thing entrusted to you” (NET). This standard is, once again, apostolic teaching—what Paul had taught Timothy. It is further described as a good thing (or “good deposit”) which had been entrusted to the next generation. Paul warns that this standard will not always be tolerated: “there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching” (4:3, NET). This apostolic standard is contrasted with the novel ideas of other “ear-itching” teachers.

Jude 3, “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” assumes specific content (else it could not be entrusted to someone) that was “fixed” at some level since “once for all” (ἅπαξ) implies some degree of finality.82 (A similar statement may appear in v. 5, depending on which textual variant is accepted; the difference is one of word order involving ἅπαξ.)

1 John 1:5, “this is the message we have heard from him and declare to you” once again implies a consistent, stable, dominically-originated message transmitted from generation to generation: Jesus to John to others. And that message is explicitly theological as the discussion of the nature of God in the context makes clear. This theology is worked out in life, but that praxis is theologically grounded since John describes it as “living [according to] the truth” (ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἁλήθειαν, v. 6).

1 John 4:1–2, the responsibility of Christians to “test the spirits” is an explicitly theological/Christological test which implies a fixed body of doctrine and specific theological affirmations to enable compliance with such a stipulation.

2 John 9–10, continuance in the “teaching of Christ”83 is John’s standard of orthodoxy. Continuing in “the teaching” is the mark of a genuine Christian (such a person “has the Father and the Son”) and “bringing this teaching” is necessary for fellowship.

Most of these references are almost incidental comments.84 There is no central passage that explains all the content of this doctrinal standard, not because it is

---

82 It is possible that this could refer to the content of the NT: “seems to imply that the doctrinal convictions of the early church had been substantially codified. That is to say, Jude could appeal to written documents of the Christian faith in his arguments with the false teachers. Most likely, these documents were the letters of Paul and perhaps one or more gospels” (NET note, ad loc.).

83 The phrase ἐν τῇ διδαξῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ is somewhat ambiguous since it may be understood either as a subjective genitive (the teaching which Jesus himself taught) or an objective genitive (the teaching about Jesus). Since John affirms the continuity of the two categories (1:5), either makes the same point here; resolution is therefore not necessary in this paper. For a discussion of the relevant considerations, see the extended note in NET.

84 The evidence could be expanded considerably by the addition of other types of passages including the early “creedal-like” affirmations (e.g., Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor 15:3–4), the Faithful Sayings of the Pastorals, many other “overtly theological” passages (such as John 1:1–4), and the “we believe” texts (e.g., Rom 6:8).
unimportant, but rather because it is assumed. Coming from an OT background, the NT authors never would have thought of any other perspective. Their worldview had inherent doctrinal content. The Bible is an inherently theological book and the NT, especially the epistles, displays that even more explicitly than did the Old.

The progression in the passages discussed above suggests that the boundaries become clearer as time progresses—which is exactly what one would expect in the progress of revelation and the spread and development of the church. The most explicit discussions come in the later books of the NT, particularly the Pastorals, Jude, and the Johannine epistles, but it is not absent even from the earliest writings in the NT (James and the early Pauline letters). Far from a fuzzy picture with blurry boundaries, the NT seems to have clear doctrinal parameters throughout. There are boundaries. And those boundaries specify “who’s in and who’s out”—who is a Christian. It is not the language of Nicaea, nor of 21st century doctrinal statements, but it is non-pluralistic language based on a standard of truth.  

85 Trusting the History of the NT

A repeated refrain in Ehrman is that any discussion such as the above is largely irrelevant and unreliable since it depends on history written by the winners (i.e., the NT)—and everyone knows that winners can’t be trusted to tell the truth about what really happened. As one sample,

As a coup de grâce, this victorious party [the proto-orthodox] rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been “orthodox” (i.e., the “right belief”) and that its opponents in the conflict, with their other scriptural texts, had always represented small splinter groups invested in deceiving people into “heresy.”

86 This sort of statement reflects the epistemological skepticism of (especially deconstructive) postmodernity as well as the postmodern view of authority in general, and that of texts and their interpretation in particular. According to postmodernism,

85 Despite the affirmations of some, these various boundary passages are not irreconcilable. Contradictory theologies are only found in the NT by those who seek them based on presuppositions which require that verdict. In addition to Ehrman, consider Erhardt’s claims: “there were at least two pre-Pauline traditions about the saving work of Jesus Christ, coming from Jerusalem, both apparently—if our interpretation of εὐαγγέλιον is correct—couched in a credal [sic] formula, and mutually irreconcilable…. We can see clearly that already in the first two decades of the new religion the unanimity about the content of its message to the world was lost, if it had ever existed” (“Christianity Before the Apostles’ Creed,” 78).

86 Ehrman, Lost Christianities, 4.
“long-defended interpretations may be nothing other than manipulative displays of power exercised by some group that is trying to enforce conformity to its heritage.”

So how might one go about justifying confidence in the history of the NT texts that recount the history of first-century Christianity? What gives us any right to believe that the NT account is any closer to what Jesus taught than any of the “alternative Christianities”? That the historical narrative of Acts honestly reflects real events as they actually happened? That the apostolic records are valid interpretations of Jesus and his significance?

At a philosophical, apologetic level I would take a different tack (a presuppositional one), but my goal here is not to convince an atheist or Ehrman (who would probably call himself an agnostic); rather it is to provide an adequate, justified rationale for our use of the NT. I do not intend this section to be an imposition of my preconceived, desired goals onto the evidence (though I am not a dispassionate investigator!), but a reasoned explanation for why we do what we do. It is a significant question, since if we cannot justify our reliance on the NT, and

if Ehrman is correct in his claim that orthodox Christianity is just the “lucky winner” of the theological battles and has no real claim to being any more “true” than any other version of Christianity, then the creeds, liturgies, hymns, and even Scripture used in churches should have a disclaimer printed next to them which reads, “all claims to truth in this text are from the perspective of the author—if your perspective differs that is okay and is true for you.” … For someone committed to some type of postmodern relativism this is not necessarily a problem. However, it is problematic for anyone who holds to an orthodox view of the Christian faith.

The question is largely a documentary one since that is our only access to historical data from ancient times. Ehrman realizes this as his discussion in chapters 9–11 indicates. He notes that “the battle for converts was, in some ways, the battle over texts, and the proto-orthodox won the former battle by winning the latter.” How do we judge the reliability of documentary claims? Which documents provide the best evidence for Jesus and his teachings? For the history of the apostolic church? The question boils down to a choice between two groups of texts: those of the NT or those from the other groups that

---


88 For a sketch of what that might look like, see the apologetics volumes by Pratt, Thomas, Bahnsen, Frame, and (ultimately) VanTil. But you’ll have to track them down on your own! The deadline for this paper is past and I dare not take any longer to look it all up and insert it here. Sorry! 😊


90 Ehrman, Lost Christianities, 180.

claimed some allegiance to Jesus and Christianity.\textsuperscript{91} There are a number of fundamental questions.\textsuperscript{92}

**First**, which documents are the closest in historical proximity to the events described? The contrast here is fairly clear: the NT documents were all written within 70 years of the events described and some of them were even contemporaneous with those events.\textsuperscript{93} By contrast, all other documents advanced as potential replacements or additions date from the 2\textsuperscript{d} century and later (some much later).\textsuperscript{94} From a strictly historical perspective, records closer to the events have a greater credibility than those removed by several centuries.

**Second**, who wrote these documents? In regards to Jesus’ life and teaching, did the writers know him personally? Did they hear him teach? In terms of the events of the early church, did the writers have direct access to the events or to those who did? In other words, in both cases, were they eyewitnesses or did they have firsthand testimony from those who were?

In terms of the gospels, the traditional view argues that two of the gospels, though formally anonymous, were written by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John), and the remaining two either by someone recording the stories of an eyewitness (Mark), or who did careful research using eyewitness testimony (either oral or written, i.e., Luke).\textsuperscript{95} As Bauckham points out, “the Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount…. The period between the ‘historical’ Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned

\textsuperscript{91} Of course if the NT documents are judged less reliable, then one would need to make a further choice among the alternatives, but the fundamental dichotomy of NT versus “other” is adequate for the initial questions since these other texts share the basic features in question.

\textsuperscript{92} Several of these issues are highlighted in Porter and Heath, *The Lost Gospel of Judas*, 105–09. I have followed their outline here in part.

\textsuperscript{93} This assumes a traditional dating of the NT texts, something which Ehrman rejects (see his *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3d ed. [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004], which, significantly, includes a discussion of not only the NT but other early Christian writings as well). The greatest span is from Jesus to the Gospel of John (roughly AD 30–95); the shortest span is the contemporaneous description by Luke of Paul’s Roman imprisonment while Paul was still in prison.

\textsuperscript{94} The most complete, authoritative collection of these documents in English is probably J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). See also Ehrman’s own collection, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003). The Gospel of Thomas *may* be the earliest of these, and some have tried to claim a first century date for it, but the general consensus is that it dates to the second century. Elliott dates it as “likely to be mid-second-century” (*Apocryphal NT*, 124); Ehrman opts for “possibly in the early second century” (*Lost Scriptures*, 20). Other early documents include 1 Clement (roughly contemporaneous with the Johannine corpus) and Shepherd of Hermas. The Gospel of Peter is late 2\textsuperscript{d} century. Other such documents are later, even medieval.

\textsuperscript{95} Ehrman rejects this conclusion, classing them as forgeries, so a complete answer would need to argue the traditional conclusions. For the present purposes it is adequate to appeal to the standard NT introductions that defend those views, e.g., D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). On anonymous writings versus eyewitness testimony, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 300–18.
... by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths.” Acts was written by an eyewitness of some of the events, Luke, who continued his research for events in which he did not participate.

By contrast none of the apocryphal gospels or acts have any direct access to eyewitness testimony, and most record events and sayings that are not parallel with the canonical texts. Nor is there any evidence for literary dependence on the first-century, canonical gospels by any of the later, apocryphal ones. Since they were written long afterwards, there is a greater credibility gap that could only be overcome by evidence of access to more direct material. That many of these pseudepigraphal writings carry the names of apostles and other NT persons shows that even the writers in the later centuries recognized the need for testimony that purports to come from the first generation of Christians.

Third, how reliable and believable are the records? This raises the question of historicity, a question that the NT handles very well. Despite many attempts, the historical accuracy of the Gospels and the book of Acts has been confirmed as realistic and credible. Despite Ehrman’s claims that these writings have been doctored to fit the preferred conclusion, it has not been demonstrated that in any particular instance that this is the case. There are instances in which particular interpretations of texts can be challenged on historical grounds, but these are not necessary interpretations and alternative, equally valid interpretations exist which do not result in such problems.

By contrast, the other early writings advanced by Ehrman and others have a very different nature. It does not take much effort to detect the differences between the canonical Gospels and their counterparts. The most extreme examples present very frivolous stories of Jesus (“charming fiction”), descriptions of him killing those who crossed him (e.g., the Infancy Gospel of Thomas 4), or bizarre, unrealistic descriptions of events (e.g., the heads of the two angels and Jesus “reached up to the sky” as they came out of the tomb; Gospel of Peter 40). Even those that correspond most closely to the canonical Gospels reflect a very different worldview compared with the NT—a very Gnostic perspective (e.g., the Coptic Gospel of Thomas 3, 22, 30, 114). Since there is no evidence of Gnosticism until the 2d century, it is anachronistic to attribute such teaching to Jesus.

---

96 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 7, 8.

97 A classic example is the Abiathar problem in Mark 2:26—the “straw that broke Ehrman’s theological back” at Princeton, ultimately causing him to reject his Christian faith (see his account in *Misquoting Jesus*, 8–9).

98 Jenkins’ designation (*Hidden Gospels*, 104), adding that “no scholar would dream of taking [them] seriously as historical sources.”

99 This is a debated issue. Although it was common fifty years ago to see Gnosticism as pre-NT in its origins (Bultmann, e.g., based much of his exegesis on finding Gnosticism as the background of many NT books), it seems that scholarly opinion has gradually shifted to recognize that the second quarter of the
There is also a stark contrast in the view of historical events (including Jesus) between the canonical Gospels and the apocryphal accounts. The canonical records explicitly affirm historicity; the Gnostic ones do not. For Gnostics, “Christ” was not a real, historical person, just an internal “reality” within the individual. Since he continued to speak in later times through individuals (i.e., the Gnostics who discovered this secret gnosis/knowledge), they felt free to write documents asserting what they wanted Jesus to say. Although that seems outrageous to us, the questions of historicity and authenticity would have been irrelevant to the Gnostics:

The Gnostics lacked any sense that the historical bona fides of a document mattered greatly. They would have been puzzled, and perhaps amused, if they had been asked whether the words attributed to Jesus in their particular gospels had any relationship to the sentiments of the historical figure of that name. Even raising the concept of the historical Jesus would have marked the questioner as hopelessly unspiritual, a slave to the material world, and one who failed to grasp even the most rudimentary stages of gnosis.

The contrast with the NT accounts, with their emphasis on eyewitness testimony about real, datable, historic events which took place in specific locations (Luke 1:1–4; John 21:24–25; 2 Peter 1:16–18; 1 John 1:1–4), is dramatic.

**Fourth,** do the records present a believable, contextual picture of Jesus in the first-century milieu of Palestinian Judaism? Just as medieval paintings typically depict first century life in medieval settings and attire, so the apocryphal writings present Jesus in an anachronistic conceptual framework—typically a 2d century Gnostic one. The entire tenor of the NT is one claiming authority for the OT—and claiming continuity with God’s revelatory and redemptive purposes there. In other words, the church claimed an authoritative, revealed standard for truth—a body of doctrine. This stood in stark contrast with other religious teachers, whether Gnostic or Marcionite, both of which

---

100 See the discussion in Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, 103–05.
101 Ibid., 104.
102 The technicalities of old/new covenant and Israel/church (and related discussions) are not necessary to make this point.
103 This is not to claim that the OT is a systematic theology textbook. Nor is it a set of theological axioms. Rather the diverse collection of literary genres together present a consistent, harmonious worldview with a single storyline that is accepted “as is” by the NT. On this unified storyline from OT into the New, see Carson, *Gagging of God*, 193–314, concluding that “the biblical plot-line establishes an entire worldview for Christians, and does not allow us to succumb to radical pluralism” (313).
rejected that standard of truth.104 “Gnosticism was a nonstarter from the outset because it rejected the very book the earliest Christians recognized as authoritative—the Old Testament!”105 As Hurtado points out, the early church affirmed,

the Scriptures of the Jewish tradition as authoritative. Consequently their characteristic interpretation of Jesus was with reference to this body of Scriptures, setting him in a positive relationship to the God they found revealed therein. There was a crucial corollary of the acceptance of the Old Testament as Scripture, with profound consequences for the reverence given to Jesus and the way his divine status was interpreted in their own time and thereafter. Proto-orthodox Christians of the first and second centuries worked out their faith within a commitment to the exclusivist monotheism of the biblical tradition…. This is also another expression of the high regard for traditional patterns of belief and practice that characterized these circles, and that distinguished them from some radically different second-century versions of Christianity.106

These are clear evidences that the “alternative Christianities” that Ehrman wants to rehabilitate have no claim to represent an accurate portrayal of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Even on a very skeptical, critical basis of “Jesus study” it is clear that Jesus saw himself in continuity with the OT; he was not a “heretical Jew” by OT standards (though he may have been considered such by first-century, traditional Judaism).

Fifth, is it true that historical records written by “winners” or those with a particular theological perspective cannot be trusted to write accurate accounts, either of their own affairs or the actions or beliefs of their opponents? Ehrman contends that “you can never rely on an enemy’s reports for a fair and disinterested presentation.”107 That statement actually addresses two different issues, which, though related, are distinct. First, are writers “disinterested,” especially those with theological convictions about the events in question? No. It takes a machine to be a dispassionate recorder—one with no human input. We are all “interested” parties. I am as I write this paper. Ehrman was as he wrote his book. And so were the apostles and others who wrote the books of the NT—and those who wrote the apocryphal books. That is perhaps one of the (few!) positive contributions of postmodernity; the modernist ideal of total objectivity has been dethroned.

104 The Gnostics only used parts of the OT, and that allegorically to as part of their mythology; they did not accept any literal or historical truth from it. Marcion, of course, rejected the OT out of hand. As Porter and Heath point out, “the Gnostic rejection of the Old Testament God and the goodness of creation … simply could not be reconciled with such a view of the Old Testament. Clearly the Gnostic rejection of the Bible of the earliest church (the Old Testament) and the Jewish roots of the church makes it clear that the Gnostic version was a radically different and later form of the Christian faith” (The Lost Gospel of Judas, 110).

105 Witherington, Gospel Code, 115.

106 Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 496.

107 Ehrman, Lost Christianities, 104. This might be taken to imply that we cannot trust Ehrman’s discussion of orthodoxy!
But second, does that mean that writers who have a stake in their story cannot get it right? Can they be fair? Ehrman, presumably, thinks that he was fair in recording his potted history of early Christianity. We may quibble, but the point is, as an author Ehrman would claim (I hope!) to write truthfully and accurately, yet he denies NT authors the same ability. It does no good for him to argue that he writes as a “historian” rather than as a theologian, for he has specific theological convictions, namely that the Bible is not trustworthy, that no one can know if there is a god, etc. Either he must argue that he can set those ideas aside so that they do not affect his writing (in which case, the NT authors could do so as well), or he must admit that his record is likewise biased and inaccurate (in which case we can safely ignore it).

Certainly the NT writers were selective in what they included. All writing is selective. But selectivity does not automatically equate with dishonesty or inaccuracy. If anything, the theological convictions of the Gospel writers would increase their concern for accuracy. If they were convinced that Jesus was indeed Messiah, resurrected Lord, indeed, God, they would be most careful to represent his teaching accurately. Only those serving a lesser being or those at a great remove historically might be tempted to make things up or to change what they remember him saying. There is no evidence that the NT writers did so.  

Conclusion

Why have heretics become so popular these days? Why does the “media love a good heretic”? Why do so many people feel the need to rehabilitate those whom history has passed by as unworthy of allegiance? Is it because they have been misrepresented and need a fair hearing? Is it because some think that we have lost something valuable as a result of the heretic classification? Henry asked the same thing in a interesting article, “Why Is Contemporary Scholarship So Enamored of Ancient Heretics?” He suggests four reasons.

1. The excitement generated by any major new discovery of unanticipated primary source material [in this case, Nag Hammadi]....
2. An attempt to legitimate various contemporary forms of radical Christianity....
3. [The] romantic notion that those who are rebellious are honest and self-aware....

Heretics, then, become the models of liberated, self-aware persons.... If we find a

---

108 This section deserves further development, but the basic line, I think, follows what I have sketched here. A particular subject deserving attention would be an assessment of how reliably the patristic writers describe their opponents. My impression is that we would find some exaggeration and some excessive rhetoric, but that the basic facts are reliable. This is, of course, a different issue from the NT since we are not dealing with writings that claim inspiration.


heretic, we have found a rebel, and if we find a rebel, we have found an authentic human being.

4. We tend to see everything in terms of power struggles, manipulations, negotiations, [etc.]… so we assume that whatever happens is most adequately explained by the dynamics of politics. And recent experience … has given us a very jaundiced view of those who come out on top in political contests…. In the early church, the Fathers are, for the most part, those who came out on top. Given our assumptions, their very identity as Fathers puts them on trial (125–26).

This seems to me to be a fairly accurate assessment.

[I should like to write more, but this paper is already one day late… ☹️ If there are later additions or corrections, I may post a later version of this paper on my web site: <www.NTResources.com>. Check for it after the conference.]

**Bibliography**


Rapp, Claudia. *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. [Note: this book was recently recommended to me as one which “de-emphasizes the role of Constantine and Emperors in the formation of Christianity,” but I have only been able to read the excerpt available at Amazon.com.]


