

*The Heresy of Orthodoxy* will help many to make sense of what is happening in early Christian studies today. It explains, critiques, and provides an alternative to, the so-called Bauer thesis, an approach which undergirds a large segment of scholarship on early Christianity. That ‘doctrine’—Christianity before the fourth century was but a seething mass of diverse and competing factions, with no theological center that could claim historical continuity with Jesus and his apostles—has become the new ‘orthodoxy’ for many. The authors of this book do more than expose the faults of this doctrine; they point the way to a better foundation for early Christian studies, focusing on the cornerstone issues of the canon and the text of the New Testament. Chapter 8, which demonstrates how one scholar’s highly-publicized twist on New Testament textual criticism only tightens the tourniquet on his own views, is alone worth the price of the book. Köstenberger and Kruger have done the Christian reading public a real service.”

Charles E. Hill, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

“The Bauer thesis, taken up in many university circles and popularized by Bart Ehrman and through TV specials, has long needed a thorough examination. *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* is that work. Whether looking at Bauer’s thesis of diversity, at contemporary use made of the theory to argue for the early origin of Gnosticism, at the process that led to the canon, or what our manuscript evidence is, this study shows that Bauer’s theory, though long embraced, is full of problems that need to be faced. What emerges from this study is an appreciation that sometimes new theories are not better than what they seek to replace, despite the hype that often comes from being the new kid on the block. It is high time this kid be exposed as lacking the substance of a genuinely mature view. This book does that well, and also gives a fresh take on the alternative that has much better historical roots.”

Darrell L. Bock, Research Professor of New Testament, Dallas Theological Seminary

“This is an admirably lucid and highly convincing rebuttal of the thesis that the earliest form of Christianity in many places was what would later be judged as ‘heresy’ and that earliest Christianity was so diverse that it should not be considered as a single movement—a thesis first presented by Walter Bauer but most recently advocated by Bart Ehrman. As Köstenberger and Kruger show with such clarity and compelling force, this still highly influential thesis simply does not stand up to scrutiny. By looking at a whole range of evidence—early Christian communities in different regions in the Roman Empire, the New Testament documents themselves, the emergence and boundaries of the canon and its connection to covenant, and the evidence for Christian scribes and the reliable transmission of the text of the New Testament—they show step by step that another view of early Christianity is much more in keeping with the evidence. They show that there is a unified doctrinal core in the New Testament, as well as a degree of legitimate diversity, and that the sense of orthodoxy among New Testament writers is widespread and pervasive. They also unmask the way contemporary culture has been mesmerized by diversity and the impact this has had on some readers of the New Testament. In this astute and highly readable book—a tour de force—Köstenberger and Kruger have done us all a great service. It is essential reading for all who want to understand the New Testament and recent controversies that have arisen in New Testament studies.”

Paul Trebilco, Professor of New Testament Studies,  
Department of Theology and Religion, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

“Köstenberger and Kruger have written a book which not only introduces the reader to the problematic Bauer thesis and its contemporary resurgence, but which, layer by layer, demonstrates its failure to account reliably for the history of communities, texts, and ideas that flourished in the era of early Christianity. In their arguments, the authors demonstrate their competence in the world of New Testament studies. But, additionally, they weave throughout

the book insights into how fallacies within contemporary culture provide fuel for a thesis that long ago should have been buried. Believers will find in these pages inspiration to “contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.”

**D. Jeffrey Bingham**, Department Chair and Professor of Theological Studies,  
Dallas Theological Seminary

“In recent times, certain media darlings have been telling us that earliest Christianity knew nothing of the ‘narrowness’ of orthodox belief. Now the authors of *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* have provided a scholarly yet highly accessible rebuttal, showing that what is actually ‘narrow’ here is the historical evidence on which this old thesis is based. In a culture which wants to recreate early Christianity after its own stultifying image, this book adds a much-needed breath of balance and sanity.”

**Nicholas Perrin**, Associate Professor of New Testament, Wheaton College

“Köstenberger and Kruger have produced a volume that is oozing with common sense and is backed up with solid research and documentation. This work is a comprehensive critique of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis that the earliest form of Christianity was pluralistic, that there were multiple Christianities, and that heresy was prior to orthodoxy. Respectful yet without pulling any punches, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* at every turn makes a convincing case that the Bauer-Ehrman thesis is dead wrong. All those who have surrendered to the siren song of postmodern relativism and tolerance, any who are flirting with it, and everyone concerned about what this seismic sociological-epistemological shift is doing to the Christian faith should read this book.”

**Daniel B. Wallace**, Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“In the beginning was Diversity. And the Diversity was with God, and the Diversity was God. Without Diversity was nothing made that was made. And it came to pass that nasty old ‘orthodox’ people narrowed down diversity and finally squeezed it out, dismissing it as heresy. But in the fullness of time (which is, of course, our time), Diversity rose up and smote orthodox hip and thigh. Now, praise be, the only heresy is orthodoxy. As widely and as unthinkingly accepted as this reconstruction is, it is historical nonsense: the emperor has no clothes. I am grateful to Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger for patiently, carefully, and politely exposing this shameful nakedness for what it is.

**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

*The* HERESY OF  
ORTHODOXY

HOW CONTEMPORARY CULTURE'S  
FASCINATION *with* DIVERSITY  
HAS RESHAPED OUR UNDERSTANDING  
*of* EARLY CHRISTIANITY

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER  
AND MICHAEL J. KRUGER

Foreword by  
I. Howard Marshall

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# Contents

Foreword: I. Howard Marshall	11
List of Abbreviations	13
Introduction: The Contemporary Battle to Recast the Origins of the New Testament and Early Christianity	15
<b>Part 1: The Heresy of Orthodoxy: <i>Pluralism and the Origins of the New Testament</i></b>	
1. The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis: Its Origins and Influence	23
2. Unity and Plurality: How Diverse Was Early Christianity?	41
3. Heresy in the New Testament: How Early Was It?	69
<b>Part 2: Picking the Books: <i>Tracing the Development of the New Testament Canon</i></b>	
4. Starting in the Right Place: The Meaning of Canon in Early Christianity	105
5. Interpreting the Historical Evidence: The Emerging Canon in Early Christianity	125
6. Establishing the Boundaries: Apocryphal Books and the Limits of the Canon	151

**Part 3: Changing the Story: *Manuscripts, Scribes, and Textual  
Transmission***

7. Keepers of the Text: How Were Texts Copied and Circulated in the Ancient World?	179
8. Tampering with the Text: Was the New Testament Text Changed Along the Way?	203
Concluding Appeal: The Heresy of Orthodoxy in a Topsy-turvy World	233
General Index	237
Scripture Index	247

## Introduction

### *The Contemporary Battle to Recast the Origins of the New Testament and Early Christianity*

**What** is truth? In a world in which at times right seems wrong—or even worse, where the lines between right and wrong are blurred to the point that we are no longer sure if there even *is* such a thing as right and wrong—Pilate’s question to Jesus takes on new urgency. Instead, all truth, including morality, becomes perspectival and subjective, a matter of nothing but personal preference and taste.<sup>1</sup> In such a world, like in the days of the judges, everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, but *unlike* in the days of the judges, this is not meant as an indictment but celebrated as the ultimate expression of truly enlightened humanity. All is fluid, doctrine is dead, and diversity reigns. Not only in restaurants and shopping malls, but even in churches and houses of worship, what people are looking for is a variety of options, and if they don’t like what they see, they take their business—or worship—elsewhere. Consumers control which products are made, children are catered to by parents, students determine what is taught in our schools and universities, and no one should tell anyone else what to do—or at least not acknowledge that they do. We live in an age that prides

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<sup>1</sup>See Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed., *Whatever Happened to Truth?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

itself on its independence, rejection of authority, and embrace of pluralism. Truth is dead; long live diversity!

In this topsy-turvy world of pluralism and postmodernity, where reason has been replaced as the arbiter of truth by perspectivalism and the unfettered and untouchable authority of personal experience, conventional notions are turned on their head. What used to be regarded as heresy is the new orthodoxy of the day, and the only heresy that remains is orthodoxy itself. “The Heresy of Orthodoxy” is more than a catchy title or a ploy concocted to entice potential readers to buy this book. It is an epithet that aptly captures the prevailing spirit of the age whose tentacles are currently engulfing the Christian faith in a deadly embrace, aiming to subvert the movement at its very core. The new orthodoxy—the “gospel” of diversity—challenges head-on the claim that Jesus and the early Christians taught a unified message that they thought was absolutely true and its denials absolutely false. Instead, advocates of religious diversity such as Walter Bauer and Bart Ehrman argue not only that contemporary diversity is good and historic Christianity unduly narrow, but that the very notion of orthodoxy is a later fabrication not true to the convictions of Jesus and the first Christians themselves.

In the first century, claim Bauer, Ehrman, and other adherents to the “diversity” doctrine, there was no such thing as “Christianity” (in the singular), but only *Christianities* (in the plural), different versions of belief, all of which claimed to be “Christian” with equal legitimacy. The traditional version of Christianity that later came to be known as orthodoxy is but the form of Christianity espoused by the church in Rome, which emerged as the ecclesiastical victor in the power struggles waged during the second through the fourth centuries. What this means for us today, then, is that we must try to get back to the more pristine notion of diversity that prevailed in the first century before ecclesiastical and political power squelched and brutally extinguished the fragile notion that diversity—previously known as “heresy”—is the only orthodoxy there is.

Indeed, the “new orthodoxy” has turned conventional thinking upside down. In this book, we endeavor to take you on a journey on which we will explore such questions as: Who picked the books of the Bible, and why? Did the ancient scribes who copied the biblical manuscripts change the Christian story? Was the New Testament changed along the way, so that we can no longer know what the original authors of Scripture wrote? In addressing these questions, we will take our point of departure from a German scholar whose name you may never have heard but who has perhaps done more to

pave the way for the new orthodoxy than anyone else: Walter Bauer. In his work *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Bauer stated what is now commonly known as the “Bauer thesis”: the view that close study of the major urban centers at the end of the first and early second centuries reveals that early Christianity was characterized by significant doctrinal diversity, so that there was no “orthodoxy” or “heresy” at the inception of Christianity but only diversity—heresy preceded orthodoxy.

The implications of Bauer’s thesis, picked up by Bart Ehrman and others, are somewhat complex, which requires that we take up his argument in three separate but interrelated parts. Part 1 of this volume is devoted to the investigation of “The Heresy of Orthodoxy: Pluralism and the Origins of the New Testament.” In chapter 1, we will look at the origin and influence of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis, including its appropriation and critique by others. Chapter 2 examines Bauer’s geographical argument for the precedence of early diversity in the Christian movement and considers patristic evidence for early orthodoxy and heresy, and chapter 3 turns to an area of investigation that Bauer surprisingly neglected—the New Testament data itself. How diverse was early Christianity, and did heresy in fact precede orthodoxy? These are the questions that will occupy us in the first part of the book as we explore the larger paradigmatic questions raised by the Bauer-Ehrman proposal.

Part 2, “Picking the Books: Tracing the Development of the New Testament Canon,” will take up the related question of the Christian canon, the collection of divinely inspired books. Ehrman and other advocates of the Bauer thesis claim that with regard to the canon, too, early diversity prevailed, and the canon likewise was but a late imposition of the Roman church’s view onto the rest of Christendom. Is this an accurate representation of how the canon came to be? Or do Ehrman and other diversity advocates have their own ax to grind and seek to impose their agenda onto the larger culture? This will involve a discussion of other alleged candidates for inclusion in the Christian Scriptures such as apocryphal gospels, letters, and other writings. Are there indeed “lost Christianities” and “lost Scriptures” that, if rediscovered, could reveal to us “the faiths we never knew,” as Ehrman contends?

Part 3, finally, “Changing the Story: Manuscripts, Scribes, and Textual Transmission,” addresses another fascinating topic: whether the “keepers of the text,” ancient scribes and copyists, actually “tampered with the text,” that is, changed the New Testament to conform it to their own beliefs and preferences. Again, this is what Ehrman alleges, in an effort to show that

even if we *wanted* to know what first-century orthodoxy was—though, of course, Ehrman himself, as a devoted follower of Walter Bauer, believes there was no such thing—we would not be able to do so because the original text is now irretrievably lost. After all, have not the autographs (the original copies of Scripture) perished? How, then, can Christians today claim that they have the inspired text? This, too, is a vital question that strikes at the very core of the Christian faith and must therefore command our utmost attention.

As the remainder of this volume will make clear, as scholars, we believe that Bauer, Ehrman, and others are profoundly mistaken in their reconstruction of early Christianity. But this is not the primary reason why we wrote this book. The main reason why we feel so strongly about this issue is that the scholarly squabbles about second-century geographical expressions of Christianity, the formation of the canon, and the preservation of the text of Scripture are part of a larger battle that is raging today over the nature and origins of Christianity. This battle, in turn, we are convinced, is driven by forces that seek to discredit the biblical message about Jesus, the Lord and Messiah and Son of God, and the absolute truth claims of Christianity. The stakes in this battle are high indeed.

Finally, for those who are interested in the history of thought and in the way in which paradigms serve as a controlling framework for how we view the world, this book has yet another intriguing contribution to make. The question addressed by the Bauer-Ehrman thesis serves as a case study for how an idea is born, how and why it is appropriated by some and rejected by others, and how a paradigm attains the compelling influence over people who are largely unacquainted with the specific issues it entails. As Darrell Bock has recently argued, and as even Bart Ehrman has conceded, Bauer's thesis has been largely discredited in the details, but, miraculously, the corpse still lives—in fact, it seems stronger than ever! What is the secret of this larger-than-life persona that transcends factual arguments based on the available evidence? We believe it is that diversity, the “gospel” of our culture, has now assumed the mantle of compelling truth—and this “truth” must not be bothered by the pesky, obstreperous details of patient, painstaking research, because in the end, the debate is not about the details but about the larger paradigm—diversity.

As in any such book, we are indebted to those who helped make it possible. In the first place, these are our wives, Marny and Melissa, and our children. We also want to acknowledge the support of our respective institutions, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Reformed

## Introduction

Theological Seminary, and express appreciation to the wonderful people at Crossway for their expert handling of the manuscript. Thanks are also due Keith Campbell for his competent research assistance in preparing chapters 1 through 3. Finally, we were grateful to be able to build on the capable work of others before us who have seen the many flaws in the Bauer-Ehrman thesis, including Darrell Bock, Paul Trebilco, Jeffrey Bingham, Craig Blaising, Thomas Robinson, and I. Howard Marshall. It is our sincere hope that this volume will make a small contribution toward a defense of the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” in our generation. *Soli Deo gloria.*

PART 1

**THE HERESY  
OF ORTHODOXY**

*Pluralism and the Origins of the New Testament*

# 1

## **The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis**

### *Its Origins and Influence*

**I**t is no exaggeration to say that the Bauer-Ehrman thesis is the prevailing paradigm with regard to the nature of early Christianity in popular American culture today. As mentioned in the Introduction, people who have never heard the name “Walter Bauer” have been impacted by this scholar’s view of Jesus and the nature of early Christian beliefs. One main reason for Bauer’s surprising impact is that his views have found a fertile soil in the contemporary cultural climate.

Specifically, in Bart Ehrman, Bauer has found a fervent and eloquent spokesman who has made Bauer’s thesis his own and incorporated it in his populist campaign for a more inclusive, diverse brand of Christianity. It cannot be said too emphatically that the study of the Bauer thesis is not merely of antiquarian interest. Bauer’s views have been adequately critiqued by others. What remains to be done here is to show that recent appropriations of Bauer’s work by scholars such as Ehrman and the fellows of the Jesus Seminar can only be as viable as the validity of Bauer’s original thesis itself.

In the present chapter, we set out to describe the Bauer-Ehrman thesis and to provide a representative survey of the reception of Bauer’s work,

both positive and negative, since its original publication in 1934 and the English translation of Bauer's volume in 1971. This will set the stage for our closer examination of the particulars of Bauer's thesis in chapter 2 and an investigation of the relevant New Testament data in chapter 3.

### Walter Bauer and *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*

Walter Bauer, born in Königsberg, East Prussia, in 1877, was a German theologian, lexicographer, and scholar of early church history. He was raised in Marburg, where his father served as professor, and studied theology at the universities of Marburg, Strasburg, and Berlin. After a lengthy and impressive career at Breslau and Göttingen, he died in 1960. Although Bauer is best known for his magisterial *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, perhaps his most significant scholarly contribution came with his work *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the publication of this volume, it was widely held that Christianity was rooted in the unified preaching of Jesus' apostles and that it was only later that this orthodoxy (right belief) was corrupted by various forms of heresy (or heterodoxy, "other" teaching that deviated from the orthodox standard or norm). Simply put, orthodoxy preceded heresy. In his seminal work, however, Bauer reversed this notion by proposing that heresy—that is, a variety of beliefs each of which could legitimately claim to be authentically "Christian"—preceded the notion of orthodoxy as a standard set of Christian doctrinal beliefs.

According to Bauer, the orthodoxy that eventually coalesced merely represented the consensus view of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that had the power to impose its view onto the rest of Christendom. Subsequently,

<sup>1</sup>Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); the original German edition was *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im Ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934; 2d ed. Georg Strecker [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964]). Other volumes on early Christianity by Bauer include a work on the canon of the epistles, *Der Apostolos der Syrer in der Zeit von der Mitte des vierten Jahrhunderts bis zur Spaltung der Syrischen Kirche* (Giessen: J. Ricker [Alfred Töpelmann], 1903); and a book on Jesus in the age of the New Testament Apocrypha, *Das Leben Jesu: Im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967). For a brief overview of other relevant books and articles by Bauer see Hans Dieter Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity," *Int* 19 (1965): 299–311. On Bauer's work as a lexicographer, see William J. Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 415–17 (with further bibliographic references); on Bauer as a historian and exegete, see *ibid.*, 451–55, esp. 452–54 on *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.

this hierarchy, in particular the Roman church, rewrote the history of the church in keeping with its views, eradicating traces of earlier diversity. Thus what later became known as orthodoxy does not organically flow from the teaching of Jesus and the apostles but reflects the predominant viewpoint of the Roman church as it came into full bloom between the fourth and sixth centuries AD.<sup>2</sup>

Although Bauer provided a historical reconstruction of early Christianity that differed radically from his scholarly predecessors, others had put the necessary historical and philosophical building blocks into place from which Bauer could construct his thesis. Not only had the Enlightenment weakened the notion of the supernatural origins of the Christian message, but the history-of-religions school had propagated a comparative religions approach to the study of early Christianity, and the eminent church historian Adolf von Harnack had engaged in a pioneering study of heresy in general and of the Gnostic movement in particular.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most importantly, F. C. Baur of the Tübingen School had postulated an initial conflict between Pauline and Petrine Christianity that subsequently merged into orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

### The “Bauer Thesis”

How, then, did Bauer form his provocative thesis that heresy preceded orthodoxy? In essence, Bauer’s method was historical in nature, involving an examination of the beliefs attested at four major geographical centers of early Christianity: Asia Minor, Egypt, Edessa, and Rome. With regard to

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<sup>2</sup>For a humorous but informative parody of the Bauer thesis see Rodney J. Decker, “The Rehabilitation of Heresy: ‘Misquoting’ Earliest Christianity” (paper presented at the Bible Faculty Summit, Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis, July 2007), 1–2. For a summary of theories of development in early Christianity, see Jeffrey Bingham, “Development and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 45–66.

<sup>3</sup>Concerning the history-of-religions school, see Carsten Colpe, “History of Religions School,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity* 2:563–65. Concerning Harnack’s views on the Gnostics, see Michel Desjardins, “Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Aïresis the Early Christian Era,” *SecCent* 8 (1991): 65–82; and Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 55–70. See also Adolf von Harnack, *The Rise of Christian Theology and of Church Dogma*, trans. Neill Buchanan (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958); idem, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

<sup>4</sup>Jerry Rees Flora, “A Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer’s Theory of Early Christian Orthodoxy and Heresy” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 212, suggests that F. C. Baur’s construction of early Christianity “proposed the angle of vision adopted” by Walter Bauer. A treatment of scholarly contributions prior to Bauer exceeds the scope of this chapter. For a discussion of Bauer’s theory in the context of the history of scholarship see Flora, “Critical Analysis,” 37–88. See also William Wrede’s proposal of an antithesis between Jesus and Paul in *Paul*, trans. Edward Lummis (Lexington, KY: American Theological Library Association, 1908).

Asia Minor, Bauer pointed to the conflict in Antioch between Peter and Paul (shades of F. C. Bauer) and the references to heresy in the Pastoral Epistles and the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation.

Bauer observed in Egypt the early presence of Gnostic Christians, contending that there was no representative of truly orthodox Christianity in this locale until Demetrius of Alexandria (AD 189–231). With regard to Edessa, a city located just north of modern Turkey and Syria, Bauer argued that the teaching of Marcion constituted the earliest form of Christianity and that orthodoxy did not prevail until the fourth or fifth century.<sup>5</sup>

Rome, for its part, according to Bauer, sought to assert its authority as early as AD 95 when Clement, bishop of Rome, sought to compel Corinth to obey Roman doctrinal supremacy. In due course, Bauer contended, the Roman church imposed its version of orthodox Christian teaching onto the rest of Christendom. What is more, the Roman church rewrote history, expunging the record of deviant forms of belief, in order to further consolidate its ecclesiastical authority.

By the fourth century, the orthodox victory was assured. However, according to Bauer, true, open-minded historical investigation shows that in each of the four major urban centers of early Christianity, heresy preceded orthodoxy. Diverse beliefs were both geographically widespread and earlier than orthodox Christian teaching. Thus the notion that orthodoxy continued the unified teaching of Jesus and of the apostles was a myth not borne out by serious, responsible historical research.

### The Reception of Bauer's Work

Although Bauer's thesis was initially slow to impact scholarship, in part because of the cultural isolation of Germany during the rise of Nazi Germany and World War II, in due course it produced a considerable number of reactions.<sup>6</sup> Two major types of response emerged. One group of scholars

<sup>5</sup>Marcionism originated with Marcion of Sinope around AD 144. Marcion taught that Jesus was the Savior sent by God and that Paul was his chief apostle. However, Marcion rejected the Old Testament because he viewed the vindictive God of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New Testament as irreconcilable. On Marcion, see *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, ed. Gerhard May and Katharina Greschat (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2002); and the classic work by Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960); *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma, 2d ed. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>Scholars in England and on the Continent widely interacted with Bauer's work following its original publication. However, Bauer's work was rarely discussed in America until after its English translation appeared almost forty years later. Since then, it has become virtually

appropriated Bauer's thesis and used it as a basis for reexamining the origins of Christianity in light of his theory.<sup>7</sup> Another group lodged a series of powerful critiques against the Bauer thesis.<sup>8</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, we will trace these varying responses to Bauer in an effort to gauge the scholarly reception of the Bauer thesis and to lay the foundation for an appraisal of the merits of his work for contemporary investigations of the origins of early Christianity.

### *Scholarly Appropriations of Bauer*

One of the foremost proponents of the Bauer thesis in the twentieth century was Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), longtime professor of New Testament studies at the University of Marburg (1921–1951).<sup>9</sup> Bultmann made Bauer's thesis the substructure of his New Testament theology that had a large impact on generations of scholars. Divorcing faith from history in keep-

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obligatory to discuss the origins of Christianity with reference to Bauer's name. For reactions to Bauer's work between the original German edition and its English translation, see Georg Strecker, "Appendix 2: The Reception of the Book," in Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 286–316.

<sup>7</sup>Arnold Ehrhardt, "Christianity before the Apostles' Creed," *HTR* 55 (1962): 73–119; James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Helmut Koester, "Gnomai Diaphoroi: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," *HTR* 58 (1965): 279–318 (repr. in Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, chap. 4); idem, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *HTR* 73 (1980): 105–30; James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003); and Einar Thomassen, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome," *HTR* 97 (2004): 241–56.

<sup>8</sup>Henry E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1954); Flora, "Critical Analysis"; I. Howard Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity," *Them* 2 (1976): 5–14; Brice L. Martin, "Some Reflections on the Unity of the New Testament," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 8 (1979): 143–52; James McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," *VC* 33 (1979): 118–30; Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988); Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994); Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 144–58; Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, A.D. 30–312*, Baker History of the Church 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); and Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>9</sup>For the following survey see especially Strecker, "Reception of the Book," 286–316; and Daniel J. Harrington, "The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* during the Last Decade," *HTR* 73 (1980): 289–98.

ing with his anti-supernatural, historical-critical methodology, Bultmann believed historical events such as the resurrection were inferior in importance to one's existential faith in Jesus.<sup>10</sup> It followed that, for Bultmann, historical orthodoxy was largely irrelevant. Marshaling Bauer's thesis to support this claim, he stated baldly:

The diversity of theological interests and ideas is at first great. A norm or an authoritative court of appeal for doctrine is still lacking, and the proponents of directions of thought which were later rejected as heretical consider themselves completely Christian—such as Christian Gnosticism. In the beginning, *faith* is the term which distinguishes the Christian Congregation from the Jews and the heathen, not *orthodoxy* (right doctrine).<sup>11</sup>

Later on in the same volume, Bultmann offered an entire excursus on Bauer's thesis, a testament to its influence on Bultmann.<sup>12</sup> The following quote shows that Bultmann followed Bauer completely in his assessment of the origins of early Christianity:

W. Bauer has shown that that doctrine which in the end won out in the ancient Church as the "right" or "orthodox" doctrine stands at the end of a development or, rather, is the result of a conflict among various shades of doctrine, and that heresy was not, as the ecclesiastical tradition holds, an apostasy, a degeneration, but was already present at the beginning—or, rather, that by the triumph of a certain teaching as the "right doctrine" divergent teachings were condemned as heresy. Bauer also showed it to be probably that in this conflict the Roman congregation played a decisive role.<sup>13</sup>

Bauer's thesis also provided the matrix for Arnold Ehrhardt (1903–1963), lecturer in ecclesiastical history at the University of Manchester, to examine the Apostles' Creed in relation to the credal formulas of the early church (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3–4).<sup>14</sup> Ehrhardt applied Bauer's understanding of diversity in the early church to a study of the formation of the Apostles' Creed. He concluded that the contents of the Apostles' Creed and the New Testament's

<sup>10</sup>F. L. Cross, ed., "Bultmann, Rudolf," *ODCC* 1:250.

<sup>11</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 2:135 (emphasis original).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:137–38.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:137.

<sup>14</sup>Ehrhardt, "Christianity before the Apostles' Creed."

creedal formulas differed, arguing that the diversity of early Christianity supported this contention. Ehrhardt acknowledged that Bauer made his exploration of this topic possible.<sup>15</sup>

In 1965, Helmut Koester, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard University and one of Bultmann's students, applied Bauer's thesis to the apostolic period.<sup>16</sup> In 1971, Koester, joined by James M. Robinson, professor of religion at Claremont University and another of Bultmann's students, expanded his article into a book, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*. In this influential appropriation of Bauer's thesis, Koester and Robinson argued that "obsolete" categories within New Testament scholarship, such as "canonical" or "non-canonical," "orthodox" or "heretical," were inadequate.<sup>17</sup> According to these authors, such categories were too rigid to accommodate the early church's prevailing diversity.

As an alternative, Koester and Robinson proposed the term "trajectory."<sup>18</sup> Rather than conceiving of early church history in terms of heresy and orthodoxy, these scholars preferred to speak of early trajectories that eventually led to the formation of the notions of orthodoxy and heresy, notions that were not yet present during the early stages of the history of the church.<sup>19</sup> Koester's and Robinson's argument, of course, assumed that earliest Christianity did not espouse orthodox beliefs from which later heresies diverged. In this belief these authors concurred entirely with Bauer, who had likewise argued that earliest Christianity was characterized by diversity and that the phenomenon of orthodoxy emerged only later.

James D. G. Dunn, professor of divinity at the University of Durham, embarked on a highly influential appropriation of the Bauer thesis in his

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>16</sup>Koester, "Gnomai Diaphoroi."

<sup>17</sup>Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories*, 270.

<sup>18</sup>Concerning Robinson's and Koester's "newly" coined term, I. Howard Marshall rightly states, "[Their use of the label] 'trajectories' to give expression of this kind of approach . . . is simply a new invention to describe a concept of which scholars have long been conscious" ("Orthodoxy and Heresy," 6–7).

<sup>19</sup>Koester made a similar argument ten years later in "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels" (*HTR* 73 [1980]: 105–30). He suggested that four apocryphal gospels (*The Synoptic Sayings Source*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, the *Unknown Gospel of Papyrus Egerton 2*, and *The Gospel of Peter*) are "at least as old and as valuable as the canonical gospels as sources for the earliest developments of the traditions about Jesus" (p. 130). As a result, Koester suggested, the terms "apocryphal" and "canonical" should be dropped since they reflected "deep-seated prejudices" (p. 105). Koester reached these conclusions by applying Bauer's thesis to the Gospel traditions.

1977 work *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Bauer (despite the title of his work!) primarily focused on the second-century situation; while Ehrhardt compared the Apostles' Creed to selected New Testament passages; and while Koester and Robinson explored extrabiblical trajectories, Dunn applied Bauer's thesis squarely to the New Testament itself. Dunn's conclusion was that, in line with Bauer's findings, diversity in the New Testament trumped unity. At the same time, Dunn suggested that the New Testament contained a general unifying theme, a belief in Jesus as the exalted Lord. According to Dunn:

That unifying element was the unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and the same person, Jesus, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

At first glance, Dunn's proposed unifying theme runs counter to Bauer's thesis that there was no underlying doctrinal unity in earliest Christianity. However, as Daniel Harrington stated, "the expression of this unifying strand is radically diverse—so diverse that one must admit that there was no single normative form of Christianity in the first century."<sup>22</sup> What is more, Dunn believed that this unifying theme resulted from a struggle between differing viewpoints, with the winners claiming their version of this belief as orthodox. Dunn, then, was the first to provide a thorough assessment of the New Testament data against the backdrop of Bauer's thesis and to affirm the thesis's accuracy when held up to the New Testament evidence.

### *The Bauer Thesis Goes Mainstream*

While Bauer, Ehrhardt, Koester, Robinson, and Dunn wrote primarily for their academic peers, Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University, and Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies at the University

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<sup>20</sup>Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*; 2d ed. 1990. Dunn wrote a briefer version of *Unity and Diversity* and discussed how his arguments relate to the question of the continuing efficacy of the canon in "Has the Canon a Continuing Function?" in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 558–79. This essay includes Dunn's updated reflections on this topic.

<sup>21</sup>Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 369.

<sup>22</sup>Harrington, "Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy*," 297.

of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, chose to extend the discussion to a popular audience.<sup>23</sup> In her 1979 work *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels popularized Bauer's thesis by applying it to the Nag Hammadi documents, which were not discovered until 1945 and thus had not been available to Bauer. Pagels contended that these Gnostic writings further supported the notion of an early, variegated Christianity that was homogenized only at a later point.<sup>24</sup>

In 2003, Pagels reengaged the Bauer thesis in *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, another work directed toward a popular readership. In this latter work, Pagels examined the *Gospel of Thomas*, a Nag Hammadi document, and claimed that modern Christians should move beyond belief in rigid dogmas to a healthy plurality of religious views since the early Christians were likewise not dogmatic but extremely diverse. As the first century gave way to the second, Pagels argued, Christians became increasingly narrow in their doctrinal views. This narrowing, so Pagels, caused divisions between groups that had previously been theologically diverse. The group espousing "orthodoxy" arose in the context of this theological narrowing and subsequently came to outnumber and conquer the Gnostics and other "heretics."

Bart Ehrman, even more than Pagels, popularized the Bauer thesis in numerous publications and public appearances, calling it "the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup> Besides being a prolific scholar, having published more than twenty books (some making it onto bestseller lists) and contributing frequently to scholarly journals, Ehrman promotes the Bauer thesis in the mainstream media in an unprecedented way. Ehrman's work has been featured

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<sup>23</sup>Others who have popularized Bauer's thesis in various ways include the following: Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997); Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1996); Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (New York: Free Press, 2000); John Dart, *The Jesus of Heresy and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). See Decker, "Rehabilitation of Heresy," 3.

<sup>24</sup>The arguments of Bauer and Pagels are not new. Prior to the Nag Hammadi discoveries and subsequent to the Enlightenment, scholars have often depicted a Jesus who differs from the orthodox presentation of him. See Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13–15.

<sup>25</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 173.

in publications such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Washington Post*, and he has appeared on *Dateline NBC*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, CNN, The History Channel, National Geographic, the Discovery Channel, the BBC, NPR, and other major media outlets.<sup>26</sup>

Part Two of Ehrman's book *Lost Christianities*, "Winners and Losers," demonstrates his commitment to, and popularization of, the Bauer thesis.<sup>27</sup> Ehrman argues that the earliest proponents of what later became orthodox Christians (called "proto-orthodox" by Ehrman) triumphed over all other legitimate representations of Christianity (chap. 8). This victory came about through conflicts that are attested in polemical treatises, personal slurs, forgeries, and falsifications (chaps. 9–10). The final victors were the proto-orthodox who got the "last laugh" by sealing the victory, finalizing the New Testament, and choosing the documents that best suited their purposes and theology (chap. 11).<sup>28</sup> In essence, Ehrman claims that the "winners" (i.e., orthodox Christians) forced their beliefs onto others by deciding which books to include in or exclude from Christian Scripture. Posterity is aware of these "losers" (i.e., "heretics") only by their sparsely available written remains that the "winners" excluded from the Bible, such as *The Gospel of Peter* or *The Gospel of Mary* and other exemplars of "the faiths we never knew."

### Summary

Scholars favorable to the Bauer thesis have appropriated his theory in a variety of ways. They have made it the central plank in their overall conception of New Testament Christianity (Bultmann); have used it to revision early church history (Ehrhardt); have taken it as the point of departure to suggest alternate terminology for discussions of the nature of early Christianity (Koester and Robinson); and employed it in order to reassess the unity and diversity of New Testament theology (Dunn).

More recently, scholars such as Pagels and Ehrman have promoted the Bauer thesis in the popular arena, making the case that contemporary Christians should move beyond the anachronistic and dogmatic notion of

<sup>26</sup><http://www.bartdehrman.com>. Accessed December 15, 2008.

<sup>27</sup>Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 159–257. Ehrman's other major publications on early Christianity include *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper, 2005).

<sup>28</sup>Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 188.

orthodoxy and instead embrace a diversity of equally legitimate beliefs. In this they appealed to the Bauer thesis, according to which it was diversity that prevailed also during the days of the early church before the institutional hierarchy imposed its orthodox standards onto the rest of Christendom.

### Critiques of Bauer<sup>29</sup>

#### *Initial Reviews*

While, as we have seen, many viewed Bauer's thesis favorably and appropriated it for their own purposes, there were others who took a more critical stance. Georg Strecker observes that in the years following the 1934 publication of Bauer's work, more than twenty-four book reviews appeared in six different languages. Although most reviews were appreciative, the following four points are representative of the tenor of the critical reviews that appeared.<sup>30</sup>

First, Bauer's conclusions were unduly conjectural in light of the limited nature of the available evidence and in some cases arguments from silence altogether.

Second, Bauer unduly neglected the New Testament evidence and anachronistically used second-century data to describe the nature of "earliest" (first-century) Christianity. Bauer's neglect of the earliest available evidence is especially ironic since the title of his book suggested that the subject of his investigation was the *earliest* form of Christianity.

Third, Bauer grossly oversimplified the first-century picture, which was considerably more complex than Bauer's portrayal suggested. For example, orthodoxy could have been present early in more locations than Bauer acknowledged.

Fourth, Bauer neglected existing theological standards in the early church. The remainder of this chapter will explore how later critics built upon these early reviews in a variety of ways.

#### *Later Critiques*

Henry E. W. Turner, Lightfoot Chair of Divinity at Durham, offered the first substantial critique of Bauer's thesis in 1954 when delivering the prestigious Bampton Lectures at Oxford University.<sup>31</sup> Turner conceded that

<sup>29</sup>See especially the detailed discussion in Strecker, "Reception of the Book," 286–316.

<sup>30</sup>For a more thorough treatment of these reviews and critiques see *ibid.*, 286–97.

<sup>31</sup>These lectures were published the same year in Henry E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1954).

theologians prior to Bauer “overestimated the extent of doctrinal fixity in the early church.”<sup>32</sup> However, he argued that Bauer caused the pendulum to swing too far in the opposite direction, charging that followers of Bauer “imply too high a degree of openness or flexibility.”<sup>33</sup> Over against Bauer’s diagnosed prevailing diversity in early Christianity, Turner argued for the following three kinds of “fixed elements.”<sup>34</sup>

First, the core of early Christianity included what Turner called “religious facts”: a “realistic experience of the Eucharist”; belief in God as Father-Creator; belief in Jesus as the historical Redeemer; and belief in the divinity of Christ. Second, Turner maintained that the early Christians recognized the centrality of biblical revelation. However one delineates the New Testament canon and views its closure, the early church viewed it (at least in part) as revelatory. Third, the early believers possessed a creed and a rule of faith.<sup>35</sup> Turner here refers to the “stylized summaries of *credenda* which are of frequent occurrence in the first two Christian centuries to the earliest creedal forms themselves.”<sup>36</sup> Such creeds include the earliest affirmations that “Jesus is Messiah” (Mark 8:29; John 11:27); “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; Col. 2:6); and “Jesus is the Son of God” (Matt. 14:33; Acts 8:37).

These fixed elements did not result in a rigid first-century theology. Instead, early Christianity, according to Turner, had the following three “flexible elements.” First, there were “differences in Christian idiom.”<sup>37</sup> For example, within early Christianity, an eschatological and a metaphysical interpretation existed side by side. However, Turner suggested that “it could be maintained that the Christian deposit of faith is not wedded irrevocably to either idiom.”<sup>38</sup> Second, there were differences in backgrounds of thought. In other words, there existed varying philosophical viewpoints among the earliest Christians that resulted in different ways of explaining the same phenomena.<sup>39</sup> A final element of flexibility in early Christianity “arises from the individual characteristics of the theologians themselves.”<sup>40</sup> The biblical writers were not monolithic but had diverse intellects and personalities.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 26–35.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 28–31.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 31–34.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 34.

Turner also more methodically confirmed the diagnosis of earlier reviewers that Bauer's thesis was drawn from an insufficient evidentiary base and did not demonstrably follow from the evidence he adduced. He also observed that Bauer's conception of "orthodoxy" was unduly narrow, while orthodoxy was "richer and more varied than Bauer himself allows."<sup>41</sup>

While Turner critiqued Bauer by noting both fixed and flexible elements in early Christianity, Jerry Flora sought to establish a historical continuity between early and later orthodoxy. In his doctoral dissertation, submitted in 1972, Flora set out to delineate, analyze, and evaluate Bauer's hypothesis.<sup>42</sup> He argued that the notion of orthodoxy that came to prevail in Rome had already been "growing in the soil of the church's first two generations."<sup>43</sup> Thus Flora maintained that there was essential historical continuity between earlier and later orthodoxy, contending that later orthodoxy was grounded in earlier doctrinal convictions that through the early apostles extended all the way back to Jesus himself: "What became the dogma of the church ca. AD 200 was a religious life which [was] determined throughout by Jesus Christ."<sup>44</sup> According to Flora, later orthodoxy "demonstrated historical continuity, theological balance, and providential guidance."<sup>45</sup>

I. Howard Marshall, professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, critiqued Bauer from a New Testament vantage point by establishing the presence of early orthodoxy. In an influential 1976 article, Marshall suggested that by the end of the first century a clear distinction already existed between orthodoxy and heresy. Marshall argued that orthodoxy was not a later development and that Bauer's argument does not fit the New Testament data. The New Testament writers, Marshall maintained, "often see quite clearly where the lines of what is compatible with the gospel and what is not compatible are to be drawn."<sup>46</sup> In some places, heresy may have preceded orthodoxy, but Bauer was wrong to suggest that orthodoxy developed later. The only point that Bauer's thesis proves is that "there was variety of belief in the first century."<sup>47</sup>

In an article published in 1979, Brice Martin, lecturer in New Testament at Ontario Bible College, explored the unity of the New Testament

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>42</sup>Flora, "Critical Analysis," 4.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 214–15.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 219.

<sup>45</sup>For a more thorough explanation, see *ibid.*, 220.

<sup>46</sup>Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 13.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

using the historical-critical method.<sup>48</sup> As a foil, Martin took Werner Georg Kümmel who stated, “The unity of the New Testament message . . . cannot be presupposed as obvious on the basis of strictly historical research.”<sup>49</sup> Martin argued just the opposite. His concern was not to study particular places where supposed New Testament contradictions occur but to offer a methodology that allows for a unified New Testament. He suggested that “significant differences are not significant contradictions (e.g., Paul versus James).”<sup>50</sup>

James McCue leveled a critique against Bauer through a narrower historical angle in a 1979 article, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians.” McCue did not set out to correct Bauer’s entire thesis but only to provide a refutation of Bauer’s perception of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy among the Valentinians.<sup>51</sup> The Valentinians were early second-century followers of Valentinus (c. AD 100–160), a Gnostic who founded a school in Rome.<sup>52</sup> McCue argued that the Valentinians originated and evolved from orthodoxy rather than, as Bauer had suggested, from an early heresy. In other words, Bauer was incorrect to suggest that the Valentinians were an example of heresy that preceded orthodoxy.

In 1989 Thomas Robinson, in a revised version of his McMaster PhD dissertation, took the Bauer thesis head on in *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*. He approached the issue of orthodoxy and heresy in the first century from the same perspective as Bauer, namely by reviewing the evidence region by region. In addition, Robinson rebutted the arguments of later scholars who built upon Bauer. Robinson consistently argued that the evidence in these geographical regions was inadequate for Bauer to lodge his claims. He concluded that

<sup>48</sup>Although Martin does not explicitly refute Bauer, his article does so by default. Martin’s omission of Bauer’s name while addressing his thesis attests to the pervasive impact Bauer’s thesis had on scholarship.

<sup>49</sup>Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1972), 403.

<sup>50</sup>Martin, “Some Reflections on the Unity of the New Testament,” 152.

<sup>51</sup>McCue, “Orthodoxy and Heresy,” 151–52. Others have critiqued Bauer similarly: A. I. C. Heron, “The Interpretation of 1 Clement in Walter Bauer’s *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im Ältesten Christentum: A Review Article*,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 55 (1973): 517–45. Fredrick W. Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered,” in *Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Schism in Early Christianity*, Studies in Early Christianity 4, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 237–58.

<sup>52</sup>See Ismo Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus,” in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian ‘Heretics*,” ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 64–99.

Bauer's work provided "an adequate basis for no conclusion other than that early Christianity was diverse."<sup>53</sup> In direct opposition to Bauer, Robinson argued that heresy in Ephesus and western Asia Minor, where evidence is more readily available, was neither early nor strong; rather, orthodoxy preceded heresy and was numerically larger. This conclusion, especially in light of the limited evidence, showed that the "failure of [Bauer's] thesis in the only area where it can be adequately tested casts suspicion on the other areas of Bauer's investigation."<sup>54</sup>

In 1994, Arland J. Hultgren, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, argued similarly to Flora that in the first century "there was a stream of Christianity—which indeed was a *broad* stream—that claimed that there were limits to diversity, and that persisted from the beginning on into the second century, providing the foundations for orthodoxy."<sup>55</sup> Although the orthodoxy of the fourth century did not exist in the first, its essential identity had been established and could not be divorced from its later, fuller manifestation. This identity had been forged from a struggle "for the truth of the gospel (right confession of faith)," which shaped "a normative tradition that provided the basis for the emergence of orthodoxy."<sup>56</sup> This orthodoxy was characterized by the following beliefs: (1) apostolic teaching is orthodox; (2) Jesus is Messiah, Lord, and God's Son; (3) Christ died for humanity's sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead; (4) the Lord is the God of Israel as the Creator, the Father of Jesus, the Father of humanity, and as the gift of the Spirit to the faithful. Early Christianity and later orthodoxy, then, stood in continuity with one another. Going back even farther than the early church, Hultgren argued that "there are clear lines of continuity between the word and deeds of the earthly Jesus and core affirmations of normative Christianity."<sup>57</sup> Thus, Hultgren agreed with Bauer that diversity existed in the earliest stages of the church, but suggested the following six unifying elements: theology, Christology, soteriology, ethos, the church as community, and the church as extended fellowship.<sup>58</sup>

I (Andreas Köstenberger) wrote an essay in 2002 that discussed the New Testament's diversity and unity. I argued that legitimate, or acceptable, diversity existed in the New Testament. It did not follow, however, that

<sup>53</sup>Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 28.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>55</sup>Hultgren, *Normative Christianity*, 22.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 87–103.

this diversity rose to the level of mutually contradictory perspectives.<sup>59</sup> I demonstrated my thesis by examining the unity in the midst of diversity between Jesus and Paul, the Synoptics and John, the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the Epistles, and between Paul and Peter, John, and James. After describing genuine elements of diversity (in the sense of mutually complementing perspectives) in the New Testament, I turned to a discussion of its unity. I proposed three integrating motifs: (1) monotheism, that is, belief in the one God, Yahweh, as revealed in the Old Testament; (2) Jesus as the Christ and the exalted Lord; and (3) the saving message of the gospel.<sup>60</sup> My conclusion was diametrically opposed to the Bauer thesis: “While Walter Bauer believed he could detect a movement from diversity to unity within the early church, the first Christians rather developed from unity to diversity.”<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

Nearly seventy-five years after Bauer proposed his thesis that heresy preceded orthodoxy, scholars are still wrestling with the implications of his theory. McCue states that “[Bauer’s work] . . . remains . . . one of the great undigested pieces of twentieth-century scholarship.”<sup>62</sup> What is beyond dispute is Bauer’s influence, which extends to virtually every discipline related to Christian studies. In fact, one of the ramifications of Bauer’s work is that many scholars no longer use the terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* without accompanying quotation marks. As Robert Wild observed, Bauer’s work “has forced a generation of scholars to reflect upon early Christianity in a new way.”<sup>63</sup>

As we have seen, while many appropriated Bauer’s thesis in support of their own scholarly paradigms, others lodged weighty criticisms against the theory. They persuasively argued that legitimate elements of diversity in the New Testament did not negate its underlying doctrinal unity (Turner, Martin, Hultgren, and Köstenberger) and that historical con-

<sup>59</sup>On the issue of legitimate vs. illegitimate diversity, see further the discussion in chap. 3 below. It should be noted here that when we speak of “legitimate” or “illegitimate” diversity, we mean, in historical terms, diversity that was doctrinally acceptable or unacceptable from the vantage point of the New Testament writers, judging from their writings included in the New Testament canon. As will be argued more fully in chap. 3, at the root of the early church’s doctrinal core was the teaching of Jesus as transmitted by the apostles and as rooted in Old Testament theology.

<sup>60</sup>Köstenberger, “Diversity and Unity,” 154–57.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>62</sup>McCue, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentiniens,” 118.

<sup>63</sup>Robert A. Wild, review of Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*, *CBQ* 52 (1990): 568–69.

tinuity existed between the theologies of first-century Christians and the church of subsequent centuries (Flora). They also demonstrated the weaknesses of Bauer's thesis by challenging his methodology and by subjecting his views to concrete—and damaging—examination in individual cases (McCue and Robinson) and by investigating his thesis in light of the New Testament data and finding it wanting (Marshall).

In more recent days, Bauer's thesis has received a new lease on life through the emergence of postmodernism, the belief that truth is inherently subjective and a function of power.<sup>64</sup> With the rise of postmodernism came the notion that the only heresy that remains is the belief in absolute truth—orthodoxy. Postmodernism, for its part, contends that the only absolute is diversity, that is, the notion that there are many truths, depending on a given individual's perspective, background, experience, and personal preference. In such an intellectual climate, anyone holding to particular doctrinal beliefs while claiming that competing truth claims are wrong is held to be intolerant, dogmatic, or worse.<sup>65</sup> It is no surprise that in this culture Bauer's views are welcomed with open arms. The Bauer thesis, as propagated by spokespersons such as Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels, and the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, validates the prevailing affirmation of diversity by showing that diversity reaches back as far as early Christianity.

On a methodological level, Bauer bequeathed on scholarship a twofold legacy: (1) the historical method of examining the available evidence in the

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<sup>64</sup>See esp. J. P. Moreland, "Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn," in *Whatever Happened to Truth?* Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 75–92, and the other essays in this volume; D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Douglas R. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); and David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>65</sup>For a trenchant critique of Ehrman in this regard, see Craig A. Blasing, "Faithfulness: A Prescription for Theology," *JETS* 49 (2006): 6–9, who writes: "Ehrman presents these proto-orthodox as especially vitriolic, slanderous, as fabricators of lies. All of the groups, he says, forged religious texts, but the proto-orthodox were especially clever at it. They also took over some earlier Christian writings and subtly inserted textual changes to make them appear to proscribe the views of their opponents. And then, in the height of arrogance, they came up with the concept of canon, which no one had thought of before, and by declaring officially the list of acceptable books they banished into obscurity the rich textual diversity of those early years of Christian history. All that was necessary after that was to rewrite history in favor of the proto-orthodox party. But, says Ehrman, that is not quite the end of the story, because the exclusivism and intolerance of the proto-orthodox spirit finally turned against itself, disenfranchising many of its own party as proto-orthodoxy itself was eliminated to make way for—Christian orthodoxy."

different geographical locales where Christianity emerged as the dominant religion; and (2) the contention that the Church Fathers overstated their case that Christianity emerged from a single, doctrinally unified movement.<sup>66</sup> These two planks in Bauer's scholarly procedure form the subject of the following chapter, where we will ask the question: Taken on its own terms, is Bauer's historical reconstruction of second-century Christianity accurate? In order to adjudicate the question, we will examine Bauer's geographical data cited in support of the pervasive and early presence of heresy. We will also look at the early patristic evidence to see whether orthodoxy was as sporadic and late as Bauer alleged.

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<sup>66</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 48–49.

## Unity and Plurality

### *How Diverse Was Early Christianity?*

**Just** how diverse was early Christianity? While, as mentioned, Bauer's claim to have investigated "earliest" Christianity while neglecting the New Testament evidence is dubious, before turning to the New Testament in chapter 3 we will first examine the Bauer thesis on its own terms. The present chapter is therefore devoted to an examination of the geographical evidence adduced by Bauer in support of his thesis that heresy regularly preceded orthodoxy in the major urban centers where Christianity was found. We will also examine the evidence from the early Church Fathers regarding the question of heresy and orthodoxy in the early stages of Christianity. As will be seen, Bauer's arguments regularly fall short of demonstrating the validity of his thesis that heresy preceded orthodoxy. First, then, let us examine the existence of heresy and orthodoxy in some of the major geographical locales where Christianity became the dominant religion.

#### **Orthodoxy and Heresy in Major Urban Centers**

As mentioned, Bauer examined four major second-century urban centers: Asia Minor (in modern Turkey), Egypt, Edessa (located east of modern Turkey about 500 miles northeast of Jerusalem near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers), and Rome. He concluded that in each of these regions heresy preceded

orthodoxy. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Bauer's arguments have not gone unchallenged. In the following discussion, we revisit these ancient urban centers in order to examine Bauer's contentions firsthand.

As we do so, three preliminary remarks may be helpful. First, it will be important to determine whether a large degree of theological uniformity existed in a given major urban center, a uniformity that did not extend to orthodox groups.<sup>1</sup> Second, there was considerable geographical movement among early adherents to Christianity so that claims assuming geographical isolation are precarious.<sup>2</sup> Third, dogmatism should be avoided in light of the limitations posed by the available evidence.

### *Asia Minor*

Paul Trebilco recently subjected Bauer's claims regarding Asia Minor to meticulous examination.<sup>3</sup> The two most important ancient witnesses to heresy and orthodoxy in Asia Minor are the New Testament book of Revelation and the early church father Ignatius. The book of Revelation was written to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, wrote a series of letters to several churches in Asia Minor enroute to his martyrdom in Rome. The cities to which he wrote were Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. The Apocalypse and Ignatius's letters preserve glimpses of these churches at the close of the New Testament era.

Bauer offered three reasons why John's and Ignatius's writings supported the notion that heresy preceded orthodoxy in Asia Minor. First, he contended that these two writers wrote letters only to church leaders in locations where a form of Christianity prevailed that resembled their own views. If the cities not addressed by John and Ignatius had contained like-minded churches, they would have sent letters to them as well. Bauer surmised that the groups not addressed by John and Ignatius were Gnostics, who would have rejected written correspondences from them.

Trebilco rightly points out the following problems with this argument. First, most scholars now believe that full-fledged Gnosticism had not yet

<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988), 37–38.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Trebilco, "Christian Communities in Western Asia Minor into the Early Second Century: Ignatius and Others as Witnesses against Bauer," *JETS* 49 (2006): 17–44.

come into existence during John's and Ignatius's time.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it is more likely that John wrote with a variety of other heretical groups in mind, while "Ignatius faced two sets of opponents—Judaizers in Magnesia and Philadelphia, and Docetists in Tralles and Smyrna."<sup>5</sup> As the following discussion reveals, the evidence suggests that neither of these opponents preceded orthodoxy in Asia Minor.

Judaizers taught that Christians should obey the Old Testament law alongside of Jesus' commands. While Ignatius mentions Judaizers in Magnesia and Philadelphia, John does not make reference to them in the letter to the church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13). The most likely reconstruction of the historical evidence suggests that Judaizers appeared in Philadelphia *after* the writing of Revelation and *before* Ignatius wrote to the same church and that the Judaizing heresy was not the original form of Christianity there.

The second group of opponents Ignatius faced was the Docetists. This particular group believed that Jesus' physical body and his death on the cross were only *apparent* (from the Greek word *dokeō*, "to appear") rather than real. For this reason, "the actual *nature* of Docetism," Trebilco observes, "seems to presuppose an underlying high Christology to start with."<sup>6</sup> It seems more likely, then, that the standard teaching of Jesus' life, death, and bodily resurrection preceded Docetism's spiritualized conception of these events. It is difficult to imagine that communities that had never heard of the major events of Jesus' life would have understood and embraced Docetism.

What is more, Docetism is not attested in the mid-first century but only surfaces in rudimentary form at the end of the New Testament period. This is evident from the letter to the church at Smyrna in the book of Revelation, which contains no reference to Docetism (Rev. 2:8–11). If Docetism had been present in Smyrna at that time, the letter most likely would have addressed it. The lack of reference to Docetism in Revelation suggests that this teaching most likely arose between the time Revelation was written and Ignatius's writings. If so, Docetism was not the original form of Christianity in Smyrna.

A second argument made by Bauer concerning Asia Minor is that the reason why John and Ignatius did not write to two known churches in that area, namely Colossae (Col. 1:7–8; 4:12) and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), is that they knew that these churches would have rejected their letters because

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 23.

these churches were heretical. However, Trebilco notes that Colossae was overshadowed by Laodicea, the most prominent city in the Lycus Valley and recipient of one of the letters to the churches in Revelation (Rev. 3:14–22). What is more, the Roman historian Tacitus mentions that Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60 (*Ann.* 14.27.1). Since Colossae was only eleven miles away, it was almost certainly damaged severely as well.<sup>7</sup> Most likely, John and Ignatius did not write letters to the church at Colossae because the city was small and less significant than the adjacent Laodicea, especially in the aftermath of the earthquake of AD 60.

Concerning Hierapolis, all that is known from the extant data is that Papias occupied the office of bishop and that Philip, along with some of his daughters (see Acts 21:8–9), settled there around AD 70. It is unwise for Bauer to draw any firm conclusions about Hierapolis based on such scant data.

In addition, there are numerous possible reasons why the particular churches mentioned in the book of Revelation were chosen as recipients of the letters. Most likely, these churches were located along a postal route, which would account for the order in which they are mentioned in Revelation.<sup>8</sup> As Trebilco rightly observes, “we cannot say that there were heretical communities in Colossae, Hierapolis, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea simply on the basis that John and/or Ignatius did not write to these places.”<sup>9</sup> Even Bauer admitted that his thesis was based on sparse data and that firm conclusions were unwarranted: “To be sure, this is only a conjecture and nothing more!”<sup>10</sup>

A third argument by Bauer was that theological diversity in Asia Minor took on the form of doctrinal disagreements between church leaders and church members. Trebilco, however, plausibly responds that while there may have been theological tensions between bishops and church members, the primary disagreements were over issues related to church leadership.<sup>11</sup> If so, the church members were not “heretics” but advocated a different type of church structure. Bauer fails to recognize this and, in so doing,

<sup>7</sup>No records survive that indicate how long it took Colossae to recover from the devastation following the earthquake.

<sup>8</sup>Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTSup 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 15.

<sup>9</sup>Trebilco, “Christian Communities,” 27.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 75.

<sup>11</sup>Trebilco, “Christian Communities,” 28–30.

“*overestimates* the theological diversity among his addressees in Asia Minor.”<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, Bauer argued that since Paul founded a church in Ephesus but John mentioned neither Paul’s name nor his theology in the letter to the Ephesian church (Rev. 2:1–7), the church at that time had no memory of Paul’s influence in that city. The lack of reference to Paul’s theology, Bauer believed, was evidence that Paul had lost the struggle with the “enemies” through “internal discord and controversies.”<sup>13</sup> Yet John may have been aware of Paul’s teaching but chosen not to mention it. In light of Paul’s extensive ministry in Asia Minor, it is highly improbable that Paul was forgotten there within one generation.

In light of the available evidence from Asia Minor, there is no reason to suppose that heresy preceded orthodoxy in this region. To the contrary, it is more likely that the original form of Christianity in Asia Minor was orthodox and that only later heretical teaching deviated from the original orthodox teaching.

### *Egypt*

Alexandria was a strategic city on the Mediterranean coastline in northern Egypt that represented a bastion of learning and culture. While the literary evidence concerning early Egyptian Christianity is scant, Bauer claimed that Gnostic-style heresies preceded Christian orthodoxy in Alexandria. He suggested that orthodox Christianity did not arrive in Egypt until the appointment of Bishop Demetrius in the early third century.<sup>14</sup>

Darrell Bock and a host of other scholars offer five major responses to Bauer’s assertion.<sup>15</sup> First, Bauer’s argument assumes that the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a second-century work, was Gnostic rather than orthodox. He reaches this conclusion by “extrapolating backward from the time of Hadrian, when such Gnostic teachers as Basilides, Valentinus, and Carpocrates were active.”<sup>16</sup> However, this is erroneous since “the exegetical and halakhic gnosis of *Barnabas* bears no relationship at all to the gnosis of Gnosticism.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 33 (italics original).

<sup>13</sup>Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 85.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 44–60.

<sup>15</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 52–53. See further the discussion below.

<sup>16</sup>Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 89.

Rather, it can be seen as a precursor to the ‘gnostic’ teaching of Clement of Alexandria and as implicitly anti-Gnostic.”<sup>17</sup>

This leads to a second response, also related to the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Instead of standing in a Gnostic trajectory, the letter more likely exhibits orthodox Christian beliefs. To begin with, it “reflects an apocalyptic concern with the end of history that is like Judaism.” This orientation, which includes a “consciousness of living in the last, evil stages of ‘the present age’ before the inbreaking of the ‘age to come’” (*Barn.* 2.1; 4:1, 3, 9),<sup>18</sup> is more akin to orthodox Christianity than to early Gnosticism. Also, the letter reflects “strands of Christianity with Jewish Christian roots” that reach back to Stephen’s speech in Acts 7.<sup>19</sup> Examples include the attitude expressed toward the Jerusalem temple and its ritual (Acts 7:42–43, 48–50; *Barn.* 16.1–2; 2.4–8); the interpretation of the golden calf episode in Israel’s history (Acts 7:38–42a; *Barn.* 4.7–8); and Christology, especially the application of the messianic title “the Righteous One” to Jesus (Acts 7:52; *Barn.* 6.7).<sup>20</sup>

A third response concerns another late second-century Egyptian document, the *Teachings of Silvanus*. Instead of espousing Gnostic principles, this letter, too, stands in the conceptual trajectory that led to the later orthodoxy of Egyptian writers such as Clement, Origen, and Athanasius.<sup>21</sup>

Fourth, Bauer ignores the fact that Clement of Alexandria, one of Egypt’s most famous second-century orthodox Christian teachers, and Irenaeus, a second-century bishop in Gaul, independently of one another claimed that orthodoxy preceded the rise of the Valentinians, an influential Gnostic movement founded by Valentinus. James McCue offers three points about Valentinian thought that Bauer overlooks: (1) The orthodox play a role in Valentinian thought such that they seem to be part of the Valentinian self-understanding. (2) This suggests that the orthodox are the main body, and at several points explicitly and clearly identifies the orthodoxy 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 orthodox matrix.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 90. For the complete argument see pp. 90–95.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 92–93; cf. Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 53.

<sup>20</sup>Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity*, 92.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 95–99; Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 53.

<sup>22</sup>James F. McCue, “Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians,” VC 33 (1979): 120.

Fifth, Birger Pearson, citing Colin Roberts, points out that there are only fourteen extant second- or third-century papyri from Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Of these, only one, the *Gospel of Thomas*, may possibly reflect a Gnostic context, which calls into question Bauer's argument for a prevailing Gnostic presence in Alexandria prior to the arrival of orthodoxy.<sup>24</sup> What is more, as Pearson rightly notes, it is far from certain that even the *Gospel of Thomas* had Gnostic origins.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Arland Hultgren observes that "the presence of Old Testament texts speaks loudly in favor of the nongnostic character of that community."<sup>26</sup> Bauer's argument that Gnosticism was preeminent in Alexandria, then, is supported by one out of fourteen papyri that may be Gnostic.<sup>27</sup> This hardly supports Bauer's thesis that Gnosticism preceded orthodoxy in Alexandria.<sup>28</sup>

The five responses detailed above combine to suggest that Bauer's argument fails to obtain also with regard to Egypt. Rather than support the

<sup>23</sup>Birger A. Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations," in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 132–33; Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1977 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), see esp. 12–14. According to Roberts's analysis of the earliest Christian papyri from Egypt (NT, OT, and patristic works), there is little indication that Gnosticism had a foothold in the second century.

<sup>24</sup>Most relevant ancient manuscripts have been discovered in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus, which has provided us with over 40 percent of our New Testament papyri—more than any other single location—covering at least fifteen of our twenty-seven New Testament books, and many of these papyri date to the second or third centuries (e.g., P.Oxy. 4403 and 4404). When one considers the fact that many of our New Testament papyri have unknown provenances (e.g., P52), and may have actually come from Oxyrhynchus, then this percentage could be even higher. For more information see Eldon Jay Epp, "The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus in their Social and Intellectual Context," in *Sayings of Jesus: Canonical and Non-Canonical*, ed. William L. Petersen (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47–68; idem, "The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: "Not Without Honor Except in Their Hometown?" *JBL* 123 (2004): 5–55; and Peter M. Head, "Some Recently Published NT Papyri From Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment," *TynBul* 51 (2000): 1–16. For more on the site of Oxyrhynchus as a whole see AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); P. J. Parsons et al., ed., *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007); and E. G. Turner, "Roman Oxyrhynchus," *JEA* 38 (1952): 78–93.

<sup>25</sup>Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt," 133.

<sup>26</sup>Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 11–12.

<sup>27</sup>In fairness to Bauer, these manuscripts were not discovered until after he published his work.

<sup>28</sup>Winrich A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts*, WUNT 83 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 33–34 (cited in Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 53).

notion that Gnosticism preceded orthodoxy, the available evidence from Alexandria instead suggests that orthodox Christianity preceded Gnosticism also in that locale.

### *Edessa*

Edessa was the primary focus of Bauer's research because he believed that there Marcionism preceded orthodoxy.<sup>29</sup> It is curious that Bauer focused so much attention on Edessa since literary data from that region is extremely limited, requiring the historian to fill many historical gaps with conjecture. Also, Edessa was not nearly as major a center of early Christianity as Ephesus or Rome. In any case, as Thomas Robinson has cogently argued, while Edessa is the one urban center where Bauer's argument might hold, even there his thesis is fraught with error.<sup>30</sup>

The primary problem with Bauer's thesis concerning Marcionism in Edessa, according to Robinson, is that "if we say that the earliest form of Christianity in Edessa was Marcionism we are forced to account for at least a century during which Edessa had no Christian witness."<sup>31</sup> This is the case because Marcionism did not arise until Marcion was excommunicated in Rome in c. AD 144. This means that Marcionism would not have arrived in Edessa until approximately AD 150. Is it likely, Robinson asked, that Edessa was without Christian influence from c. AD 50 until about 150?

In theory, it is conceivable that Edessa remained impervious to Christianity during this one-hundred-year period since Edessa did not become part of the Roman Empire until AD 216. Prior to this date, convenient travel for early Christian missionaries to Edessa could have been limited or prohibited.<sup>32</sup> Robinson, however, challenges this contention of an Edessa isolated from Christianity: "Although Edessa was not part of the Roman [E]mpire at the beginning of the Christian church, it was, as a city on a major trade route in a bordering state, not isolated from the Roman [E]mpire."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 22.

<sup>30</sup>Helmut Koester, an adherent to Bauer's thesis (see chap. 1), concurred that orthodoxy did not precede heresy in Edessa. He believed, however, that a non-orthodox "Thomas tradition" arrived first in Edessa ("Gnomai Diaphoroi"; for a rebuttal of this view see Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 52–59). Koester's argument is interesting because it exemplifies the lack of consensus concerning what type of Christianity first appeared in Edessa even among those who are committed to the thesis that heresy preceded orthodoxy in that location.

<sup>31</sup>Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 47.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

Moreover, since a prominent Jewish community existed in Edessa, it seems unlikely that there would have been no contact with Antioch, the largest Jewish center in the area. Although Antioch was a considerable distance from Edessa (c. 250 miles), the Jewish capital Jerusalem was a distant 750 miles away. Thus Jews in Edessa would have communicated more readily with their closer compatriots in Antioch. What is more, during the earliest years of Christianity Jews and Christians were in close contact. In light of this, it is unlikely that the Jews of Edessa were unaware of Christianity.<sup>34</sup> This is further unlikely in view of the contact “between Jews and Christians in most of the major cities of the Roman world.”<sup>35</sup>

In fact, the very attestation of Marcionism may indicate a form of Christianity that preceded Marcionism. This is indicated by the very nature of Marcionism:<sup>36</sup> “All our evidence indicates that Marcion’s activities were directed not at the conversion of pagans but at a reformation of the catholic church in terms of a radical Paulinism.”<sup>37</sup> By virtue of denying the validity of the Old Testament Scriptures and by critically editing the Pauline literature, Marcionism was a message most apt for people steeped in the Jewish Scriptures and in the writings of Paul. For this reason Marcionism was most likely a corrective rather than a converting movement, seeking to change how people viewed Christianity rather than teaching it for the first time.

If so, it may be surmised that an element of Pauline or Jewish Christianity was present in Edessa that Marcionism subsequently sought to correct. As Robinson aptly notes:

Quite simply, the Marcionite message had too many Christian assumptions at its core for its primary audience not to have been the larger Christian community. If, then, early Marcionism neither looked for nor found an audience other than an already Christian one, the success of Marcionism in Edessa would seem to serve (against Bauer) as evidence *for*, rather than against, an early catholic-like Christianity there.<sup>38</sup>

It is possible that a substantially altered form of Marcionism, one more intelligible for an audience not steeped in a form of Christianity, arrived in Edessa at a later time. If so, Marcionism made its way to Edessa no earlier than c. AD 145–150. Since, as mentioned, the earliest form of Marcionism

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>This argument is similar to the one regarding Docetism above.

<sup>37</sup>Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 49.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 51 (*italics original*).

addressed an already existing version of Christianity, more time would have had to elapse to allow Marcionism to change its primary emphasis. Yet such a late date for the arrival of Marcionism in Edessa seems unlikely in a predominantly Jewish city in relatively close proximity to Antioch, Christianity's early hub of activity (Acts 11:26).<sup>39</sup>

Evidence is lacking, therefore, that heresy preceded orthodoxy in Edessa. As far as we can tell, when Marcionite teaching arrived, it most likely set itself against an earlier form of Christianity that may well be characterized as orthodox.

### *Rome*

As mentioned in chapter 1, Rome played an especially crucial role in Bauer's argument. Primarily from *1 Clement* (c. AD 95), Bauer claimed that orthodoxy had a firm stronghold in Rome and that Roman leaders, by virtue of their power over other churches in different locations, imposed their orthodoxy throughout the Empire. This form of orthodoxy, Bauer maintained, had nothing to do with an original form of Christianity that can be traced back to the New Testament or to Jesus. Instead, it was simply the belief of the Roman church. The heretics of other cities and their theologies were relegated to the sidelines largely because they lost the battle with Rome.<sup>40</sup>

As Darrell Bock contends, if Rome was the impetus for orthodoxy, Bauer must demonstrate two facts.<sup>41</sup> First, he must show that orthodoxy did not exist elsewhere, since, if it did, orthodoxy was not a characteristic solely of the Roman church, nor was it necessarily original with Rome. Second, Bauer must show that "Roman communication in *1 Clement* . . . to Corinth was not merely an attempt to persuade but was a ruling imposed on Corinth."<sup>42</sup>

However, the data does not support Bauer's thesis in these respects. First, as noted above, orthodoxy was present in Asia Minor and most likely also prevailed in Egypt and Edessa. Orthodox teaching, then, was not a characteristic solely of the Roman church but a feature attested also in other regions. Second, when one compares the tone of *1 Clement* to that of other letters from the same time period, it is evident that the letter did not aim to impose a theological position onto the Corinthian church but to persuade

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 51–52.

<sup>40</sup>See Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 229.

<sup>41</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 50.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. For a full critique of Bauer's reconstruction of early Christianity in Corinth, see Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 69–77.

the Christians there to accept it.<sup>43</sup> If the Roman church had carried the authority Bauer ascribed to it, one would expect *1 Clement* to convey an authoritative tone that would tolerate no dissent. Since *1 Clement* does not exhibit such a tone, Rome, though wielding wide and increasing influence during the patristic era, had not yet become the sole locus of authority.

Bock registers six additional arguments against the Roman control thesis.<sup>44</sup> First, the idea of each city appointing only one bishop probably did not originate with Rome but most likely began in Jerusalem and Syria. There is evidence that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15; Gal. 2:9). In addition, Frederick Norris presents a strong argument that while the case Ignatius made for the theological and organizational significance of the bishop may have been new, “prior to his writing, the offices existed and were distinguished from each other in Asia Minor, and probably Western Syria.”<sup>45</sup> This is important because Bauer believed that the centralization of the episcopal office in Rome was central to Rome’s power. If this practice originated outside of Rome, however, Rome’s power may not have given birth to orthodoxy but simply replicated what Rome had already inherited.

Second, Ignatius, who was not from Rome, spoke of theological schisms between opposing groups. Since Ignatius is considered by most to be part of the orthodox, this intimates a competition between heresy and orthodoxy. This competition suggests the presence of orthodoxy outside of Roman control, an orthodoxy that did not originate with Rome and was not imposed by her.

Third, Asia Minor, a location far away from the city of Rome, is the likely provenance of many extant “orthodox” materials such as John’s Gospel, his three letters, Revelation, and several of Paul’s letters. To argue that Rome imposed orthodoxy on other geographical regions later on gives insufficient consideration to orthodox activity already attested in locations such as Asia Minor.

Fourth, Marcion of Sinope, who was branded as a heretic by many early Christians, assumed the authority of some works that were later recognized as orthodox. In the mid-second century, Marcion developed a canon that

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<sup>43</sup>On this point, see Fredrick W. Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered,” in *Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Schism in Early Christianity*, Studies in Early Christianity 4, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 36–41.

<sup>44</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 51.

<sup>45</sup>For the complete argument, see Frederick W. Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered,” *VC* 30 (1976): 23–44 (esp. 29–36).

included an edited version of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles, rejecting all other gospels and letters. Marcion formed his canon either in reaction to an already established standardized collection in the early church or he pioneered the idea himself. Either way, it is notable that within his system he depended on works that later achieved orthodox status, and this apart from Rome.

Fifth, as Bock observes, the earliest liturgical texts that we possess come from Syria, not Rome.<sup>46</sup>

Sixth, Pliny the Younger wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan with regard to a Christian community in Bythynia that worshiped Jesus, a practice that points to the existence of orthodox belief there (*Ep.* 10.96–97).<sup>47</sup>

For these reasons it is evident that orthodoxy existed in locations other than Rome. Although Roman control certainly solidified in subsequent centuries, it is erroneous to suggest, as Bauer did, that early orthodoxy did not exist elsewhere. In fact, the existence of orthodoxy in other locations may well explain Rome's relatively easy success in acquiring ecclesiastical power and in demanding adherence to orthodoxy. If other cities had been mired in a plethora of diverse forms of Christianity, doctrinal uniformity would have been much more difficult to enforce. On the other hand, if Rome were not the driving force behind the consolidation of orthodoxy in earliest Christianity, orthodoxy must have been less isolated and more widespread than Bauer was willing to concede.

### *Summary*

The above examination of the extant evidence has shown that in all the major urban centers investigated by Bauer, orthodoxy most likely preceded heresy or the second-century data by itself is inconclusive.

### **Indications of Early Orthodoxy in Patristic Literature**

Apart from what we know about the presence of orthodoxy and/or heresy in the major urban centers of early Christianity, what can we know about these phenomena more broadly? Bart Ehrman opens his book *Lost Christianities* with a dramatic statement about how diverse the early church was, suggesting that early Christianity was so fragmented that, essentially, there were possibly as many forms of Christianity as there were people.<sup>48</sup> Does Ehrman's statement about this period square with the evidence?

<sup>46</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 51.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2–3.

In this section, we examine both orthodoxy and heresy in the patristic era in order to show that Ehrman's assessment of the data is inadequate. First, we will investigate orthodoxy in the early centuries of the Christian era. As will be seen, the church fathers, far from being innovators, were committed to the New Testament orthodoxy that preceded them. Second, we will examine heresy in the same period, showing that orthodoxy served as the theological standard from which various forms of heresy deviated.

Before embarking on this examination, a brief look at four principal views concerning the progression of early Christianity will help frame the discussion.<sup>49</sup> The first position was espoused by Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who suggested that Hellenism influenced the post–New Testament church to the point of eradicating the original sense of the gospel message.<sup>50</sup> The later church accommodated the surrounding culture, adding layers to the gospel that resulted in a message that significantly differed from the original.

John Henry Newman (1801–1890), a Roman Catholic priest, proposed a second view: the Christianity that originated with Jesus and his apostles was merely the starting point of a series of theological developments that continued to evolve over the centuries. As a result, fourth-century orthodoxy was but vaguely connected to the original.<sup>51</sup> A third view is that of Walter Bauer, Bart Ehrman, and others—the Bauer-Ehrman thesis—which, since it was already dealt with in chapter 1, needs no further discussion here.

Finally, John Behr, dean and professor of patristics at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, argues that the theology that emanated from the New Testament, continued through the church fathers, was guarded by the Apologists,<sup>52</sup> and solidified in the ecumenical church councils<sup>53</sup> represents a continuous uninterrupted stream.<sup>54</sup> The theology espoused by the orthodox

<sup>49</sup>For a fuller exploration and description of the progression of early Christianity, see Jeffrey Bingham, "Development and Diversity in Early Christianity," *JETS* 49 (2006): 45–66.

<sup>50</sup>Adolf von Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Northgate, 1894).

<sup>51</sup>John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans Green, 1888; repr., London: Sheed & Ward, 1960).

<sup>52</sup>The Apologists were early Christian writers (c. AD 120–220) who defended the Christian faith and commended it to outsiders.

<sup>53</sup>The so-called First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (AD 325) produced the Nicene Creed. Six subsequent councils convened in AD 381, 431, 451, 553, 680–681, and 787, respectively.

<sup>54</sup>John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea, The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

clarified, elucidated, and expounded the theology of the New Testament without deviating from it, and the creeds accurately represent the essence of the apostolic faith.

As the following discussion will show, Behr's position does the most justice to the available evidence from the first two centuries of the church.

### *Orthodoxy in the Patristic Era*

As we will see, the essential theological convictions of Jesus and the New Testament writers continued into the second-century writings of the church fathers. The place to begin this exploration is with the pervasive and decisive role that the "Rule of Faith"<sup>55</sup> (Latin *regula fidei*) played in the post–New Testament church. The Rule appeared as early as 1 *Clement* 7.2 in an undeveloped form and is found in virtually all the orthodox writings of the patristic era from varied geographical locales including Irenaeus (c. 130–200), Tertullian (c. 160–225), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), Origen (c. 185–254), Hippolytus (c. 170–236), Novatian (c. 200–258), Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 200–265), Athanasius (c. 296–373), and Augustine (c. 354–430). Irenaeus and Tertullian were the first writers to discuss the Rule at length. Irenaeus identified it with the central governing sense or overarching argument of Scripture (*Haer.* I. 9–10).<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Tertullian called it the "reason" or "order" of Scripture (*Praescr.* 9).

Although the church fathers never explicitly spelled out for posterity the Rule's specific theological content,<sup>57</sup> there is relative consensus among scholars that it served as a minimal statement concerning the church's common faith. It has variously been called "the sure doctrine of the Christian faith";<sup>58</sup> a "concise statement of early Christian public preaching and communal belief, a normative compendium of the *kerygma*";<sup>59</sup> a "sum-

<sup>55</sup>Also variously referred to by the post–New Testament writers as Rule of Piety, Ecclesiastical Rule, Rule of the Church, Evangelical Rule, Rule of the Gospel, Rule of Tradition, Sound Rule, Full Faith, Analogy of Faith, Law of Faith, Canon of the Truth, Canon of the Church, and Preaching of the Church.

<sup>56</sup>See Paul Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith' and Patristic Biblical Exegesis," *TJ NS* 28 (2007): 67.

<sup>57</sup>For a brief look at how scholars have delineated the Rule, see Paul M. Blowers, "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *ProEccl* 6 (1997): 199–228.

<sup>58</sup>M. Eugene Osterhaven, "Rule of Faith" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1043.

<sup>59</sup>Hartog, "The 'Rule of Faith,'" 66, summarizing Eric F. Osborn, "Reason and Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD," in *Making of Orthodoxy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 48.

mary of the main points of Christian teaching . . . the form of preaching that served as the norm of Christian faith . . . the essential message . . . fixed by the gospel and the structure of Christian belief in one God, reception of salvation in Christ, and experience of the Holy Spirit”;<sup>60</sup> and “the substance of [the] Christian faith, or truth as a standard and normative authority.”<sup>61</sup>

Bart Ehrman concurs with these descriptions of the Rule: “The [Rule] included the basic and fundamental beliefs that, according to the proto-orthodox, all Christians were to subscribe to, as these had been taught by the apostles themselves.”<sup>62</sup> As will be discussed in chapter 3, the apostles and New Testament writers adhered to an orthodoxy that centered on Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. The Rule of Faith contained and proclaimed this core New Testament message as the central tenet of Christianity. Nearly from the beginning of the post–New Testament era, then, a geographically pervasive group of Christian writers espoused a theological standard that unified them.

The church fathers saw their role as propagators, or conduits, of this unified and unifying theological standard. They used the nomenclature of “handing down” to describe their role (e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.3). Their self-perceived calling was to take what they had received from the apostles and hand it down to their generation and to posterity. This idea of propagating what was received appears as early as Clement of Rome (*1 Clem.* 42.1–3; c. AD 96) and Ignatius (*Magn.* 13.1; 6.1; *Phld.* 6.3; c. AD 110) who encouraged their readers to remain in the teachings of Christ and the apostles (cf. *Pol. Phil.* 6.3). Irenaeus continues to speak in these terms: “Such is the preaching of the truth: the prophets have announced it, Christ has established it, the apostles have transmitted it, and everywhere the church presents it to her children” (*Epid.* 98; cf. *Haer.* 3.1.1; 3.3.1). Not only did the early Fathers see themselves as proclaiming the gospel, but they also viewed themselves as the guardians of the message (e.g., *1 Clem.* 42).

The origin of this theological standard that the Fathers passed on was perceived to be the Old Testament (e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 29; Justin, *Apol.* 1.53; *Barn.* 14.4). The Fathers taught that the gospel originated with the Old Testament prophets, whose message was taken up by the apostles who,

<sup>60</sup>Everett Ferguson, “Rule of Faith,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990), 804–5.

<sup>61</sup>Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Rule of Faith,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 758.

<sup>62</sup>Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 194.

like the prophets, were sent by God.<sup>63</sup> This self-understanding stands in marked contrast to second-century sects that sought to strip the gospel of its Old Testament roots. Rather than being devoted to and dependent on the teaching of the apostles, these groups held that secretly revealed knowledge about Jesus trumped historical and theological continuity. The Fathers, on the other hand, taught that the Rule of Faith originated with the Old Testament prophetic message, which was fulfilled in Jesus and proclaimed by the apostles. The Fathers, in turn, guarded this message and passed it on to others, handing the baton to subsequent generations of believers.

What happened to the Rule of Faith after the Fathers passed it along? Its contents, that is, the core gospel message, made its way into the third- and fourth-century creeds. In two recently published works, Gerald Bray argues this point by investigating the Nicene Creed and concluding that its authors did not anachronistically read orthodoxy back into previous centuries. Examining the Nicene Creed step by step, Bray traces every detail of its theological contents from the New Testament through the Fathers to its codification in the creed. For example, concerning the first article of the Nicene Creed, Bray remarks, “The bedrock of the church’s beliefs remained unaltered, and in the first article of the creed we can be confident that we are being transported back to the earliest days of the apostolic preaching.”<sup>64</sup> D. A. Carson agrees: “[While it may be erroneous] to read . . . fourth-century orthodoxy back into the New Testament . . . it is equally wrong to suggest that there are few ties between fourth-century orthodoxy and the New Testament.”<sup>65</sup>

That the Fathers preserved the orthodoxy of the New Testament and delivered it to those who formulated the creeds does not necessarily mean that the New Testament writers would have conceived of their theology in the same exact constructs as those of the creeds. For example, although the term “Trinity” does not appear in the New Testament, the concept is clearly present (e.g., Matt. 28:19; 1 Pet. 1:2). Creedal third- and fourth-century orthodoxy, then, is not in opposition to the orthodoxy purported in the New Testament and propagated by the Fathers. It is, as Behr suggests, an organic continuation of what the New Testament writers began without

<sup>63</sup>Joseph F. Mitros, “The Norm of Faith in the Patristic Age,” *TS* 29 (1968): 448.

<sup>64</sup>Gerald L. Bray and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Doctrine I* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), xxxvi.

<sup>65</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 31.

any transmutation of the DNA of the New Testament gospel message, which, in turn, is rooted in the Old Testament.<sup>66</sup> This is especially evident in the similarities between the following words of Irenaeus and those of the later creeds:

[The Church believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed by the prophets the (divine) dispensations and the coming of Christ, his birth from a virgin, his passion, his rising from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, and his manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things in one and to raise up again all flesh of the whole human race. (*Haer.* 1.10.1)

Therefore, as Larry Hurtado contends:

Well before the influence of Constantine and councils of bishops in the fourth century and thereafter, it was clear that proto-orthodox Christianity was ascendant, and represented the emergent mainstream. Proto-orthodox devotion to Jesus of the second century constitutes the pattern of belief and practice that shaped Christian tradition thereafter.<sup>67</sup>

To sum up, then, the church fathers' Rule of Faith served both as a theological continuation of New Testament orthodoxy and as a conduit to the orthodoxy of the creeds.

However, affirming an essential theological unity among the church fathers, the basic content of whose essential teaching derived from their apostolic forebears, does not by itself address the degree to which their teaching was prevalent among early Christianity at large. The question remains whether the orthodox represented but a (small) part of second-century Christianity as Ehrman contends, with alternate forms of Christianity being equally, if not more, prominent, or whether orthodox Christianity constituted the prevailing form of Christianity not only in the fourth century but already in the second century. To answer this question, we now turn our attention to the heresies attested in this period.

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<sup>66</sup>Behr, *Way to Nicaea*.

<sup>67</sup>Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 561.

*Heresy in the Patristic Era*

As mentioned, Bart Ehrman and others argue that the proponents of second-century orthodoxy represented, at best, a minor group in a diverse religious landscape that featured a large variety of alternative forms of Christianity. In the next chapter, we will seek to demonstrate that orthodoxy emerged in the New Testament period and was passed along by the apostolic fathers. In the remainder of this chapter, we will attempt to show that the various forms of heresy in the patristic era were not as widespread as Ehrman contends and that these heretics were not nearly as unified as the orthodox. In fact, the available evidence suggests that heretical groups were regularly parasitic of the proponents of orthodoxy that were already well established and widespread.

The second century produced numerous heretical groups. For example, the Ebionites were a leading group of Jewish Christians who, because of their Jewish roots, denied Jesus' divinity. Another example is furnished by the Docetists who held that Jesus only appeared to be, but was not in fact, human. The only second-century group, however, that remotely rivaled and presented a serious challenge to orthodoxy was Gnosticism.<sup>68</sup> The Gnostic movement was more widespread than any other second-century heresy and was the only one that offered an alternative to orthodoxy that had "potential staying power."<sup>69</sup> For this reason, we use Gnosticism as a test case in order to examine the nature of second-century heresy and how it related to its orthodox counterpart.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Some classify various subsets to Gnosticisms (i.e., Syrian gnosis, Marcionism, Valentinism, and the Basilidian movement; later movements include the Cainites, Peratae, Barbelo-Gnostics, the Sethians, and the Borborites, to mention only a few) as individual religio-philosophical systems. In this section, they are presumed to be loosely connected under the broader umbrella of Gnosticism. If, however, these sects do represent independent and unrelated entities, then the argument of this section is considerably strengthened to the extent that discussion becomes nearly moot. For a fuller explanation of the complexities of these movements, see Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 519–61. Our information about the Gnostics comes from the Nag Ham-madi documents and from the following church fathers who refuted them: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Hippolytus, *Refutations of all Heresies*; Epiphanius, *Panarion*; and Tertullian, *Against Marcion*. For more information on Gnosticism, see PHEME PERKINS, "Gnosticism," *NIB* 2:581–84, and David M. Scholer, "Gnosis, Gnosticism," in *DLNT*, 400–412.

<sup>69</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 25.

<sup>70</sup>Although we limit this section to a study of Gnosticism because of space and because of Gnosticism's influence, comparable information concerning other second-century texts is mentioned in various footnotes. The conclusions reached in this section regarding Gnosticism apply equally to other second-century sects. For a fuller overview of all the known sects of the second century see Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics,"* Supplements to VC (Boston: Brill, 2005) (note accompanying

Specifically, we will investigate whether second-century orthodoxy was just one among many forms of Christianity that was caught in a struggle against a large number of alternatives. The following three points concerning Gnosticism reveal that orthodoxy was the norm of earliest Christianity and that Gnosticism was subsidiary and comparatively less pervasive.

First, Gnosticism was a diverse syncretistic religious movement that, although loosely sharing a few key thematic elements,<sup>71</sup> never emerged as a singularly connected movement.<sup>72</sup> In light of this diversity, it is debatable whether a singular term such as “Gnostic” adequately encapsulates the movement. Gnosticism, in essence, was demonstrably diverse and only loosely connected by an overall philosophical framework. As a result, or perhaps because, of this diversity, Gnosticism never formed its own church or groups of churches. Instead, the Gnostics were basically “a conglomeration of disconnected schools that disagreed with each other as well as with the traditional Christians.”<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that second-century orthodox Christianity was largely unified. To begin with, as mentioned in the previous section, the prevalence of the Rule of Faith in the writings of the second-century Fathers demonstrates the pervasive unity on core Christian doctrines. Also, orthodox Christians founded thriving churches as early as the AD 50s, which is attested by Paul’s many letters. Paul wrote to established churches in Galatia, Thessalonica, Corinth, Rome, Philippi, Ephesus, and other locations.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, there is ample evidence that these congregations exhibited “an almost obsessional mutual interest and interchange” among themselves.<sup>75</sup> In other words, these congregations, although spread throughout the known world, viewed themselves as a

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bibliographies for further study) and Chas S. Clifton, *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992).

<sup>71</sup>For a brief summation of these key elements see PHEME PERKINS, “Gnosticism,” *NIB* 2:583–84. Docetism, likewise, was extremely variegated (D. F. WRIGHT, “Docetism,” *DLNT* 306). The data concerning the Ebionites is too scant to know the degree of unity which this sect possessed. Wright states, “Making consistent and historically plausible sense of patristic testimonies to the Ebionites is a taxing assignment” (D. F. WRIGHT, “Ebionites,” *DLNT* 315).

<sup>72</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 23.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 23–24.

<sup>74</sup>That Paul addresses “overseers and deacons” in Phil. 1:1 indicates that he is writing to an established church.

<sup>75</sup>See Rowan Williams, “Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11–12.

unified network of churches.<sup>76</sup> Orthodox Christians, then, organized themselves into local assemblies remarkably early, established leadership (e.g., Acts 14:23; 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:2), agreed on fundamental beliefs, and interacted regularly and frequently. These characteristics do not support Ehrman's portrait of an underdeveloped first- and second-century orthodoxy.

Second, to the degree that Gnosticism became organized, it did so substantially later than orthodox Christianity.<sup>77</sup> Historians disagree regarding the origin of Gnosticism. Some believe that it originated independently of and prior to orthodox Christianity.<sup>78</sup> Others think that it originated independently and alongside of orthodox Christianity.<sup>79</sup> Still others argue that it arose as a reaction to either Christianity<sup>80</sup> or Judaism.<sup>81</sup> Darrell Bock is probably right that Gnosticism formed in the shadow of Christianity and/or Judaism.<sup>82</sup> There is no literary evidence that confirms a first-century origin of Gnosticism, contrary to Schmithals's argument that Paul's opponents were Gnostics.<sup>83</sup> The first-century data, rather, reveals, at best, a primitive, incipient form of Gnosticism (e.g., 1 Tim. 6:20; 1 John 2:20;

<sup>76</sup>See, e.g., M. B. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 49–70. This self-perceived unity continues into the era of the church fathers (see Williams, "Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?" in *Making of Orthodoxy*, 12–14).

<sup>77</sup>Although primitive Docetism is perhaps detectable at the end of the first century (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7), there is no evidence that it arose concurrently with orthodoxy. Likewise, the evidence is too sparse to draw firm conclusions about the origin of the Ebionites (see Wright, "Ebionites," *DLNT* 315–16).

<sup>78</sup>Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösungsmythos* (FRLANT 78; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961); Karl Prümm, *Gnosis an der Wurzel des Christentums? Grundlagenkritik an der Entmythologisierung* (Müller: Salzburg, 1972). But see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

<sup>79</sup>Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. M. Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 275–94.

<sup>80</sup>Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 223–66; Simone Petrément, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, trans. Carole Harrison (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

<sup>81</sup>R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968); Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

<sup>82</sup>Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 30.

<sup>83</sup>Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

2 John 1:9).<sup>84</sup> When this first-century data is compared with what we know of Gnosticism from the second century, a picture emerges of a movement that begins to surface in the latter half of the first century and begins to take shape in the first half of the second century (evidenced by the growing body of literature and the church fathers' vehement attacks against it) but never coalesces into a unified entity. In light of the available first-century evidence, any assessment that concludes that Gnosticism was organized earlier than the second century is ultimately an argument from silence.

Orthodox Christianity, conversely, was organized early (in the AD 40s and 50s). Not only is this exhibited in the above-mentioned early formation of churches but also in the early solidification of a core belief system that will be examined in the next chapter. Although the complexity of ecclesiastical organization increased in the second century, the church's foundational organizing principles were already well in place in the first century. The apostolic fathers and subsequent church leaders, therefore, did not supply the original impetus for organizing the church; they had already inherited its foundational structure and core beliefs.

Third, prior to Constantine's Edict of Milan (AD 313) that mandated religious toleration throughout the Roman Empire, adherents of orthodoxy had no official means or power to relegate heretics to a marginal role. Nearly concurrent with this Edict was the Arian controversy (AD 318). Interestingly, there is no significant mention of any Gnostic sect during this controversy. It seems that by that time Gnosticism was either forgotten or so insignificant as to hardly warrant any of the orthodox's attention. This means that prior to Constantine's mandated religious toleration, the orthodox were able decisively to refute these heretical movements. If the heretics were as numerous and pervasive as Ehrman contends and if orthodoxy was relatively insignificant prior to the fourth century, then historical probabilities suggest that it would have been unlikely that orthodoxy would have been able to overturn these heretical movements. Without an official governing body in place, the only way that the orthodox could have "won" prior to Constantine was through the force of sheer numbers. It is clear, then, that second- and third-century Gnosticism could not have been as pervasive and influential as second-century orthodoxy.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup>But note in this regard the recent refutation of the Gnostic background for 1 John by Daniel R. Streett, "They Went Out from Us": The Identity of the Opponents in First John" (PhD diss.; Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

<sup>85</sup>Bray, *Ancient Christian Doctrine I*, xxxix. Cf. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 521. The same applies to other second-century heretical movements.

Nevertheless, the following questions might be asked regarding early Christian heresies. First, some may contend that the archaeological discovery of a Gnostic library in Upper Egypt (Nag Hammadi) suggests that Gnosticism was just as prevalent as orthodoxy. If the writings of the orthodox were the primary witnesses to Christianity during this period, it may be asked, how could so many Gnostic documents survive? In response, Gerald Bray rightly notes that the survival of these texts can be explained by a variety of factors, one of them being the remoteness of the location where these Gnostic texts were found.<sup>86</sup> What is more, even if archaeologists were to discover Gnostic writings in other locations, this would still not overturn the above-stated argument for the prevalence of orthodox Christianity over Gnosticism.

Second, if early Christian heresies were not as pervasive as orthodoxy, then what accounts for the pervasive mention of heresy in the writings of the orthodox “at every turn”?<sup>87</sup> But as Rodney Decker rightly responds, “Intensity of rhetoric does not translate to any particular estimate of numerical predominance.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, a vocal minority may receive attention out of proportion to its actual size or influence. In fact, the orthodox very likely engaged heretical groups at great length, not because the heterodox were so large in size, but because the orthodox deemed the heretical message so dangerous.

There is yet another way to examine second-century heresy and how it relates to orthodoxy. One may trace a central orthodox doctrine, such as the deity of Christ, back in history in order to establish which group originated first and which one deviated from the other. Larry W. Hurtado, professor of New Testament language, literature, and theology at the University of Edinburgh, masterfully does this in his work *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. In essence, Hurtado demonstrates the swiftness with which monotheistic, Jewish Christians revered Jesus as Lord.<sup>89</sup> This early “Christ devotion,” which entailed belief in Jesus’ divinity, was amazing especially in light of the Jewish monotheistic belief that was

<sup>86</sup>Bray, *Ancient Christian Doctrine I*, xxxix.

<sup>87</sup>Ehrman poses this question in *Lost Christianities*, 176.

<sup>88</sup>Rodney J. Decker, “The Rehabilitation of Heresy: ‘Misquoting’ Earliest Christianity” (paper presented at the Bible Faculty Summit, Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis, July 2007), 29.

<sup>89</sup>Hurtado’s argument stands as a corrective to Wilhelm Bousset’s hypothesis that Hellenism shaped Christianity’s high Christology over time resulting in its gradual emergence (*Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970]). Other works that trace theological

deeply ingrained in Jewish identity, worship, and culture. The revolutionary nature of the confession of Jesus as Lord and God, especially in such chronological proximity to Jesus' life, cannot be overstated.<sup>90</sup> The study of early Christian worship of Jesus thus further confirms that heresy formed later than, and was parasitic to, orthodoxy. In the following brief survey, we will first trace the belief in Jesus' divinity through the orthodox and then through the heretical literature.

Hurtado's study of early Christian belief in the deity of Christ begins with Paul's writings (limited to the "undisputed Pauline Epistles") because they were written prior to the other New Testament documents.<sup>91</sup> Hurtado shows that there is evidence that the early Christians acknowledged Jesus as Lord and God as early as twenty years after his death (1 Cor. 8:4–6). What is more, this pattern of devotion to Jesus likely preceded Paul since it is referenced in two pre-Pauline confessions or hymns (1 Cor. 15:3–6; Phil. 2:6–11). When dealing with various doctrinal and practical issues, Paul nowhere defends Jesus' lordship and divinity but regularly assumes the existence of these beliefs among his readers.

It might be objected that devotion to Jesus as Lord did not extend to the church at large but was limited to the "Pauline circle." The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In light of the evidence from Acts and Paul's letters regarding broader Judean Christianity, which consisted of "followers of Jesus located in Roman Judea/Palestine in the first few decades" of the church's formation, Hurtado concludes that devotion to Jesus as Lord far exceeded Paul's immediate circle of influence.<sup>92</sup> Such devotion to Jesus is evident in the pervasive reference to Jesus as Lord and the "functional overlap" of Jesus and God.<sup>93</sup> Devotion to Jesus as Lord, then, occurred so early that it could not have originated with Paul. This means that "the most influential and momentous developments in devotion to Jesus took place in

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themes of early Christianity include J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1977); and John Behr, *Way to Nicaea*.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. Ed J. Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 170, 259–60, and Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?: Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 2006), 285–86.

<sup>91</sup>Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 79–153.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 155–216.

early circles of Judean believers. To their convictions and the fundamental pattern of their piety all subsequent forms of Christianity are debtors.”<sup>94</sup>

Turning his attention to the New Testament literature written subsequently to Paul, including the so-called “Q” source and the Synoptic Gospels, Hurtado finds the same devotion to Jesus as Lord in these writings.<sup>95</sup> “Q,” presenting “a clear and sustained emphasis on the importance of Jesus,” not only emphasizes the centrality of Jesus, but also uses the same Christological categories to describe Jesus. What is more, the fact that “Q” or other sources used by the Synoptic writers already referenced devotion to Jesus most likely was a major reason why Matthew and Luke, in particular, may have drawn on these sources as significantly as they did.<sup>96</sup> The Synoptic Gospels, similar to Paul, continue to depict radical commitment to Jesus as Lord. This is most clearly evident in their consistent application of the honorific titles to Jesus used by Paul and those who preceded him. Many of these adherents to Christianity were Jews who continued to be committed to monotheism, making their devotion to Jesus as Lord all the more remarkable.

When John wrote his Gospel in the AD 80s or early 90s, therefore, far from developing a high Christology of his own, he rather continued and expounded upon the lordship of Jesus that had begun to be confessed already during Jesus’ lifetime and almost immediately subsequent to his resurrection.<sup>97</sup> One of the most remarkable elements in John’s portrayal of Jesus are the seven “I am”<sup>98</sup> statements, which represent a direct claim of divinity on the part of Jesus, as well as Jesus’ explicit affirmation that he and the Father are one (John 10:30).<sup>99</sup>

When one turns to the Christology found in the Gnostic writings, such a variegated picture emerges that discussing it is nearly impossible.<sup>100</sup> This fact

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 216. Cf. Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series, 5 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009, and forthcoming).

<sup>95</sup>Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 217–347; cf. Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 39–43. *The Gospel of Thomas* also teaches an exalted Jesus (*Thomas 77*; cf. Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 38), contrary to Elaine Pagels’s arguments (*Beyond Belief*, 68).

<sup>96</sup>For Hurtado’s specific arguments concerning “Q,” see *Lord Jesus Christ*, 244–57.

<sup>97</sup>Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 349–426.

<sup>98</sup>The expression “I am” clearly echoes God’s self-identifying remarks in Exodus 3:14 as taken up in Isaiah 40–66.

<sup>99</sup>For a full-fledged treatment of John’s Gospel in the context of first-century Jewish monotheism see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel*, NSBT 24 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), chap. 1.

<sup>100</sup>The Ebionites, according to the church fathers, rejected both Jesus’ virgin birth and his deity (see *Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics,”* 247).

alone reveals the degree to which orthodoxy was unified and the degree to which Gnosticism was not. Nevertheless, several pertinent beliefs regarding Jesus can be discerned. First, and most importantly, Gnostics severed any connection between Jesus and the God of the Old Testament. While the orthodox writers portray Jesus and the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh) as integrally related,<sup>101</sup> Gnostics thought that the Old Testament God was inferior and evil and that Jesus was radically different from him. Thus Jesus was not the Creator as John and other New Testament writers affirmed (see, e.g., John 1:1–3) but a creature distinct from the Creator.

Second, the role of Jesus as Redeemer was not to save people from their sins by virtue of his sacrificial death on the cross, but to bring knowledge (*gnōsis*) to entrapped humanity. This knowledge resulted in salvation. By contrast, the orthodox teaching regarding Jesus was that he died as Savior and Lord for the forgiveness of sins.

On the whole, however, what is more important than *what* Gnostics (and other sects) believed about Jesus is *when* they started believing it. Unlike the orthodox, whose core Christological beliefs coalesced in the early to mid-first century, Gnostics did not solidify their Christology—if such solidification ever occurred—until sometime in the second century. The same is true of all other known first- and second-century sects. Orthodoxy, then, emerged first, followed by a variety of rather amorphous second-century heresies. These heresies, for their part, diverted from an orthodox Christology that was already widely believed and taught.

Thus as the first century gave way to the second, what Hurtado calls a “radical diversity” began to emerge.<sup>102</sup> A notable theological shift occurred. The incipient whispers of Gnosticism in the late first century gradually developed more fully and eventually led to the production of Gnostic writings setting forth a variety of Christological and other beliefs. In these works, the presentation of Jesus significantly diverged from the views that had preceded these Gnostic documents for nearly a hundred years.

Two conclusions emerge, therefore, from our study of early Christian views concerning Jesus’ deity. First, this core component of Christian orthodoxy—the belief in the divinity of Jesus and worship of him as Lord and God—was not forged in the second century on the anvil of debate among various Christian sects. Instead, such a belief dates back to the very origins of Christianity during and immediately subsequent to Jesus’ earthly ministry.

<sup>101</sup>See on this point especially Christopher H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), chap. 4.

<sup>102</sup>Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 519–61.

Second, it was only considerably later that various heretical sects deviated from this existing Christological standard trajectory.

### Conclusion

Although the late first and early second century gave birth to a variety of heretical movements, the set of (Christological) core beliefs known as orthodoxy was considerably earlier, more widespread, and more prevalent than Ehrman and other proponents of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis suggest. What is more, the proponents of second-century orthodoxy were not innovators but mere conduits of the orthodox theology espoused already in the New Testament period. The following timeline will help summarize and clarify the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy in the patristic era.

- AD 33: Jesus dies and rises from the dead.
- AD 40s–60s: Paul writes letters to various churches; orthodoxy is pervasive and mainstream; churches are organized around a central message; undeveloped heresies begin to emerge.
- AD 60s–90s: the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament are written and continue to propagate the orthodoxy that preceded them; orthodoxy continues to be pervasive and mainstream; heresies are still undeveloped.
- AD 90s–130s: the New Testament writers pass from the scene; the apostolic fathers emerge and continue to propagate the orthodoxy that preceded them; orthodoxy is still pervasive and mainstream; heresies begin to organize but remain relatively undeveloped.
- AD 130s–200s: the apostolic fathers die out; subsequent Christian writers continue to propagate the orthodoxy that preceded them; orthodoxy is still pervasive and mainstream, but various forms of heresy are found; these heresies, however, remain subsidiary to orthodoxy and remain largely variegated.
- AD 200s–300s: orthodoxy is solidified in the creeds, but various forms of heresy continue to rear their head; orthodoxy, however, remains pervasive and mainstream.

This timeline shows that heresy arose after orthodoxy and did not command the degree of influence in the late first and early second century that Ehrman and others claim. Moreover, the orthodoxy established by the third- and fourth-century creeds stands in direct continuity with the teachings of the orthodox writers of the previous two centuries. In essence, when

## Unity and Plurality

orthodoxy and heresy are compared in terms of their genesis and chronology, it is evident that orthodoxy did not emerge from a heretical morass; instead, heresy grew parasitically out of an already established orthodoxy. And while the church continued to set forth its doctrinal beliefs in a variety of creedal formulations, the DNA of orthodoxy remained essentially unchanged.

## Subject Index

- 1 *Clement*, 50–51, 54, 135, 136–39, 149  
1 Corinthians, 137, 137n44  
1 Peter, 139, 189n41  
2 Peter, 149, 158, 189n41; dating of, 129, 129n11; pseudonymous status of, 128–29  
1 Timothy, 149; as a pseudonymous work, 131–32  
3 John, 158
- Acts, book of, 75, 79n18, 84, 131, 139  
*Adversus Marcionem* (Tertullian), 199–200n89  
*Against Heresies* (*Adversus haereses* [Irenaeus]), 188, 199–200n89, 200  
*agrammatoi*, 185  
Alexander, Loveday, 182  
Alexandria, 198; Gnosticism and Christianity in, 45–48; library in, 198  
Alexandrinus codex, 164  
Allert, Craig D., 126–27n5, 137n44  
Ambrose, 199  
Antioch, 49, 50, 142, 198  
*Apocalypse of Peter*, 158  
apocryphal books, 151–52, 169, 175; apocryphal gospels, 164; distinction of from New Testament books, 154–55; in early Christianity, 160–61. *See also* individually listed apocryphal books and gospels
- “Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels” (Koester), 29n18  
Apologists, the, 53, 53n52  
apostles, 25, 96, 132–33, 141, 171, 233; “memoirs” of, 134; “super-apostles,” 159  
Apostles’ Creed, 28–29  
apostolic authority, 101, 137–38, 138n46, 141; and New Testament texts, 116–18; of Paul, 136–37  
apostolic fathers, the, 136, 137–38; recognition by of the authority of the apostles, 138n46. *See also* individually listed *apostolic fathers*  
apostolic office, and redemptive history, 115–16  
apostolic tradition, and “Catholicism,” 128n8  
Arian controversy, 61  
asceticism, 93  
Asia Minor, 51, 97; Christianity in, 25, 26, 41; orthodoxy and heresy in, 42–45, 50; seven churches of, 42  
Athanasius, 46, 54, 170, 172  
Athenagoras, 189  
Atticus, 190  
Augustine, 54
- Baar, James, 106, 112  
Balaam, 98

- Barnabas, citing of literature outside the Old and New Testaments, 146–47, 146–47n85
- Barton, John, 138, 144, 156–57
- Basilides, 45
- Bauckham, Richard, 71–72, 78, 148
- Bauer, Walter, 16, 18, 25n4, 47n27, 50–51, 53, 82, 99, 100, 153–54; education and career of, 24; influence of, 38–40, 105–6, 108, 179–80; reception of his work, 26–27, 33–38; reception of his work in America, 26–27n6; validation of, 70
- “Bauer thesis,” 17, 25–26, 66, 69, 70, 105, 153, 161, 170, 179, 180, 224–25; challenge of, 151–52; conception of orthodoxy in, 35; initial critiques of, 33; invalidity of, 233; later critiques, 33–38, 39n65; mainstream approaches to, 30–32; scholarly appropriations of, 27–30, 32–33
- Bauer Thesis Examined, The: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (T. Robinson), 36–37
- Bauer–Ehrman thesis, 19, 23–24, 53, 71, 100, 101
- Baur, F. C., 25, 25n4, 26
- Behr, John, 53, 56
- Betz, Hans Dieter, 84
- Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (Pagels), 31, 126, 152
- Bible, the, covenantal structure of, 124
- Bingham, Jeffrey, 19
- Blaising, Craig A., 19, 39n65, 73n5
- Bock, Darrell, 18, 19, 50, 52; on the origin of Gnosticism, 60
- book/publishing technology, 181–82, 187n31; access of Christians to copyists, 189; book publication within early Christianity, 196–200; Christian scribes/copyists, 186–90, 189n41; codex form of the book, 192–95, 193–94n62, 194–95, 194n67, 196; distinct handwriting styles used in (bookhand and documentary hand), 187, 188–89n40; elegance of Christian texts, 188; elegance of classical literary manuscripts, 187n32; multifunctional professional scribes, 188–89; “multiple-quire” codex, 195–96n72; publishing resources in Gaul and Carthage, 199–200n89; quality of commercial versus privately copied manuscripts, 189–90; scribal training, 188–89n40; scrolls, 193, 193n61, 194; use of punctuation by scribes, 188, 188n35
- Bousset, Wilhelm, 62–63n89
- Bray, Gerald, 56, 62
- Bultmann, Rudolf, 27–28
- Bythynia, 52
- Caesarea, 198
- Campbell, Keith, 19
- Campanhausen, Hans von, 126
- canon, 123–24, 200n90; boundaries of, 126–27n5, 174–75; and the codex, 194–95; concept/idea of, 106, 108, 108nn10–11, 126–27, 149–50, 151; canonical documents (God’s word), 119–21, 120nn46–47; definition of, 105–6n1, 107; historical circumstances of, 160; meaning of, 107–8; and the redemptive activities of God, 115–16. *See also* canon, closing of; canon, and community; canon, and covenant; canon, emergence/formation of
- canon, closing of, 170, 174; attitudes toward limitation of the canon, 171–72; definition of “closed,” 170–71
- canon, and community, 118–19; connection of the canon to community, 122–23; shaping of community by the canon, 119–22
- canon, and covenant (*berith*), 109; and the apostolic tradition, 116–18; concept of covenant, 109–10; and redemptive history, 113–15; structure of ancient covenants, 110–11; structure of the Mosaic covenant, 111–13
- canon, emergence/formation of, 106–7, 107n6, 121n50, 125–27, 136; allusions to a bi-covenantal canon, 132–33; early citations of canonical books, 129–32; early collections of canonical books,

## Subject Index

- 127–29; public reading of canonical books, 133–36
- Carpocrates, 45
- Carson, D. A., 56; on Paul's theology, 88–89
- Celsus, opinion of Christians as “ignorant,” 183, 185–86
- Cerinthus, 96, 97n86
- Chaereas and Callirhoe*, 189n42
- Chariton of Aphrodisias, 189n42
- Christianities, 16, 105, 153, 233, 234
- Christianity, 16, 18, 24, 40, 46; Jewish, 49; as an oral religion, 181n5; Pauline, 25, 49; Petrine, 25; proto-orthodox, 32, 39n65, 57;. *See also* Christianity, early
- Christianity, early, 25, 31, 33, 69, 70, 125, 126, 152, 171, 174, 179, 233; alternate forms of, 57, 58; in Asia Minor, 25, 26, 41; bookish/textual culture of, 180–86, 200–201; diversity in, 39, 41; in Edessa, 25, 26, 41; in Egypt, 25, 26, 41; fixed elements of, 34; flexible elements of, 34; geographical centers of, 25–26; and later orthodoxy, 37; organization of, 61; as portrayed in the New Testament, 73–74; as preceding Marcionism, 49; publication of books within, 196–200; “trajectories” in, 29; unity of, 59–60, 159. *See also* Christianity, early, canonical diversity in; Christianity, early, scribal infrastructure of; orthodoxy and heresy, in major urban centers; Roman church, the
- Christianity, early, canonical diversity in, 152–53; expectations of diversity, 158–60; relevance of, 153–55
- Christianity, early, scribal infrastructure of, 186, 197; Christian scribes, 186–90; complaints concerning scribes, 203–4n2; scribal variations/mistakes, 203–4, 206, 206n5. *See also* book/publishing technology
- Christians, 31, 43, 124, 127, 174, 233; “Christ devotion” among Jewish Christians, 62–64; contact with Jews, 49; Gentile Christians, 90; Gnostic Christians, 26; as illiterate, 182–83; Jewish Christians, 58, 62–63, 90; orthodox Christians, 60, 163; preference of for the codex form of books, 193–94, 193–94n62; proficiency of in textual studies, 184–85; “proto-orthodox” Christians, 32, 39n65, 70; social class of, 183–84, 184n20. *See also* book/publishing technology
- Christology, 37, 81, 99, 222; Christological confession, 101; Docetic Christology, 96; Gnostic Christology, 64–65; high Christology, 43, 62–63n89, 78
- Church Fathers (apostolic fathers), 40, 41, 66, 145, 149; on the origin of the gospel, 55–56
- Cicero, 197n75; employment of scribes by, 189n42
- circumcision, 90
- Claromontanus codex, 164
- Clement, 197–98, 197–98n78
- Clement of Alexandria, 46, 54, 105–6n1, 162, 163, 220
- Clement of Rome, 26, 55; acknowledgment of Paul's apostolic authority, 136–37; Gospel citations in, 138–39; reference to 1 Corinthians as a “letter in the Spirit,” 137, 137n44; reference of to the epistles of Paul, 137, 138
- codex. *See* book/publishing technology, codex form of the book
- Codex Alexandrinus, 219, 222
- Codex Bezae (D), 212n31, 219, 227
- Codex Sinaiticus, 164, 198n80, 211, 215n41, 220
- Codex Vaticanus, 211, 220
- Colossae, 43, 44, 92, 92n64
- Colossians, book of, 91–92, 197
- Constantine, 57, 61
- Corinth, 50, 59, 93
- Crete, 93
- Cullmann, Oscar, 123
- Cyprian, 199, 199–200n89
- David, 79
- “Day of Preparation,” 86
- Decker, Rodney, 62

- Dehandschutter, Boudewijn, 142–43
- Demetrius of Alexandria, 26
- Didache*, 139–40, 143, 149; on the commandments of the Lord being written texts, 139–40; relationship of to the Gospel of Matthew, 139, 139n50
- Dionysius of Alexandria, 54
- Dionysius of Corinth, 173, 173n60
- diversity: in early Christianity, 39, 41, 52, 75n8, 153–54, 174, 179, 234; extent of, 155–58; “gospel” of (the diversity doctrine), 16; in the New Testament, 37–38, 38n59. *See also* Christianity, early, canonical diversity in
- Docetism/Docetists, 43, 58, 222; origin of, 60n77
- Dunn, James D. G., 29–30, 30n20
- Ebionites, 58, 222; origin of, 60n77
- Edessa: Christianity in, 25, 26, 41; Marcionism in, 48–50; the “Thomas tradition” in, 48n30
- Edict of Milan (Constantine), 61
- Egypt: Christianity in, 25, 26, 41, 50; Gnostic-style heresies preceding Christianity in, 45–48; papyri from, 47
- Ehrhardt, Arnold, 28–29, 30
- Ehrman, Bart, 16, 17, 18, 23, 30–31, 53, 57, 71, 73, 147n91, 152, 153, 161, 230n68, 233; on the accuracy of the text of Galatians, 212–13, 213n33; claims of that early Christians were illiterate, 182–83; commitment of to the “Bauer thesis,” 84–85n33, 224–25; on diversity in early Christianity, 52, 159; on the Gospels of Matthew and John, 71–72n2; insistence that Christian texts were not copied by professional copyists, 190; on the *Letter to Flora*, 16–63; on the number of textual variants in New Testament manuscripts, 214, 217–18, 220n48, 221–22; popularization of the “Bauer thesis” by, 31–32, 39; postmodern perspective of, 162–63; on the role of the Old Testament, 156n8; on the Rule of Faith, 55; skepticism of concerning authenticity of New Testament texts, 204–5, 209–10; on textual variants affecting core Christian doctrines, 228n65; theological considerations of concerning the accuracy of New Testament texts, 229–30, 229n66; on theologically motivated changes to New Testament manuscripts, 222–24, 223n57
- Elliott, J. K., 168, 169, 195
- Enlightenment, the, 25
- Ephesus, 42, 48, 59, 93, 97; Paul’s founding of a church in, 45
- Epicureanism, 95
- Epiphanius codex, 164
- Epistle of Barnabas*, 45–46, 143, 149, 158, 161, 163–64, 175; Old and New Testament citations in, 146–47, 146–47n85; as “Scripture,” 164
- Epp, Eldon Jay, 192, 208–9, 210, 221; on textual variants in New Testament manuscripts, 214–15, 214–15n36
- Eusebius, 149, 164, 173, 198n80, 199
- faith, 27–28
- “Faithfulness: A Prescription for Theology” (Blaising), 39n65
- Fee, Gordon D., 94, 209, 230n68
- First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 53n53
- First Edition of the New Testament, The* (Trobisch), 195
- Flora, Jerry, 35, 37
- Gaius, 173–74, 174n62, 207, 207n8, 210
- Galatia, 59, 92, 93
- Galatians, book of, 90–91, 196, 212–13, 213nn32–33
- Gamble, Harry, 106, 107, 181, 184, 185, 195; on Clement’s role as an “ecclesiastical publisher,” 197; on the quality of commercial versus privately copied manuscripts, 189–90
- Gentiles, 83, 90–91; Gentile Christians, 90
- “Gnostic Gospels,” 152
- Gnostic Gospels, The* (Pagels), 31
- Gnosticism/Gnostics, 26, 28, 31, 42–43, 47n23, 91, 93, 94, 95; challenge of to orthodoxy, 58–62; Christology of,

Subject Index

- 64–65; diverse nature of, 59; the *Epistle of Barnabas* as a Gnostic document, 45–46; the *Gospel of Mary* as a Gnostic document, 167–68, 168n42; the *Gospel of Thomas* as a Gnostic document, 165–66; origins of, 60–61; proto-Gnosticism, 93, 99, 162n19; subsets of, 58n68; Valentinian Gnosticism, 162, 162n19, 167
- God, 109, 113, 138, 234, 235; the power of God’s word, 119–20; redemptive activity of, 113–14, 115, 124; as Yahweh, 65. *See also* Trinity, the
- God’s people, 122–23
- Gospel of Judas*, 152
- Gospel of Mary*, 32, 154, 155, 161, 167–68, 168n42, 175
- gospel message, the, 38
- Gospel of Nicodemus*, 161, 168–69, 171, 175; popularity of in the Middle Ages, 169; recounting of Jesus before Pilate in, 168–69, 168n46
- Gospel of Peter*, 32, 134
- Gospel of Philip*, 161, 166–67, 175
- Gospel of Thomas*, 31, 72n3, 161, 175; dating of, 165–66; presumed Gnostic origins of, 47, 165–66
- gospel witness, reliability of, 71–73
- Gospels, the, 66, 74–75, 212. *See also* Synoptic Gospels, the
- Grapte, 197
- Greco-Roman world, 181, 183, 194, 197n75; elegance of literary manuscripts in, 187n32; public readings of books in, 196; scribes in, 189, 190
- Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer), 24
- Hahneman, Geoffrey, 170, 172
- Haines-Eitzen, Kim, 187–88, 188n34, 189, 189n41, 190; on the *nomina sacra*, 192n56
- Harnack, Adolf von, 25, 53, 97n88
- Harrington, Daniel J., 132n28
- Harris, J. Rendel, 221
- Hebrews, book of, 181
- Hellenism, 53, 62–63n89, 99
- Hemer, Colin J., 97–98, 97nn87–88; on challenges facing Paul, 98n94; on the designation of “Jezebel,” 98n91
- heresy, 16, 24, 90n54, 175; in Ephesus and western Asia Minor, 37; in the patristic era, 58–66; as preceding orthodoxy, 17, 26, 28, 38. *See also* New Testament heretics (Paul’s opponents); orthodoxy and heresy, in major urban centers
- Heresy of Orthodoxy, The* (Köstenberger), 17–19
- heterodoxy, 24
- Hierapolis, 43, 44, 147
- High View of Scripture, A* (Allert), 126–27n5, 137n44, 146–47n85
- Hill, Charles, 141, 148
- Hippolytus, 54, 162
- historical method, the, 39–40
- History of Rome* (Velleius Paterculus), 207, 210, 210n20
- “holy prophets,” 132, 132n29, 133
- Holy Spirit, 108n10, 117, 121n50, 124, 126; and God’s people, 122–23
- Hooker, Morna D., 92n64
- Horbury, William, 164
- Horton, Michael, 109–10
- Hultgren, Arland J., 37, 38, 47
- Hurtado, Larry W., 57; on “Christ devotion” and the deity of Jesus, 62–65
- hymns: Christological hymns, 81; Pauline hymns, 77–78
- Ignatius, 42, 43, 44, 51, 55, 140–42, 149; acknowledgment of the authority of the apostles, 141, 142; allusions to canonical Gospels in, 141–42; letters of, 198–99; reference of to Paul’s epistles, 141
- Institutes, The* (Gaius), 207, 207n8, 210, 210n21
- Irenaeus, 46, 54, 55, 57, 105–6n1, 145, 149, 157, 162, 164, 195n68, 199, 199–200n89; as creator of the New Testament canon, 126; and the limitation of the canon, 172; on the Nicolaitians, 97n86

- James, 38  
 James, book of, 139, 181  
 Jerusalem, 49, 51, 91, 198; library in, 198n80  
 Jerusalem Council, 75n8, 83, 91  
 Jesus Christ, 18, 26n5, 31n24, 34, 38, 54, 55, 58, 66, 79, 83, 96, 113, 124, 138, 163, 185, 216, 228, 234; appointment of the apostles, 75; continuity between Jesus and Paul, 85; controversial nature of, 159; deity of, 62–65; as exalter Lord, 30, 73–74, 100; existential faith in, 28; as God the Father, 222; as “Lord” in the New Testament, 79–80, 79n16; as Messiah, 80; oral tradition of, 130, 130n17; as Redeemer, 65; as the second Adam, 109; as the second Moses, 114; sisters of, 225–26; supremacy of, 77–78; teachings of, 25, 74–75, 140  
*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Bauckham), 71–72, 71–72n2  
*Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible* (Ehrman), 84–85n33, 89n50, 147n91, 156n8, 220n48  
 Jesus Seminar, 39, 233  
 Jewish Scriptures, 184  
*Jewish War* (Josephus), 207, 210  
 Jews, 185; contact with Christians, 49  
 Jezebel, 98, 98n1  
 John, 38, 42, 43, 44, 45, 72, 147, 149, 185; on the lordship of Jesus, 64  
 John, Gospel of, 80, 96, 143, 141, 147, 174n62, 181, 188; *Comma Johanneum* textual variant in, 219–20; differences of from the Synoptic Gospels, 83–84, 85–87; earliest known text of, 200, 210–11; relation to the Synoptic Gospels, 85–87  
 Johnson, William, 187n32  
 Joseph of Arimathea, 169  
 Josephus, 207, 210  
 Judaism, 46, 60, 92, 94, 99, 111–12; apocalyptic Judaism, 92n66  
 Judaizers, 43, 82, 91, 159  
 Judas, 75  
 Judea (Roman Judea), 63  
 Justin Martyr, 134, 162, 168n46  
 Kenyon, Frederick, 195n68  
*kerygma*, 54  
 Kline, Meredith G., 111, 112  
 Knight, George, 94  
 Koester, Helmut, 29, 29nn18–19, 30, 72n3, 126, 142; idea of the “Thomas tradition” in Edessa, 48n30  
 Köhler, W.-D., 146  
 Köstenberger, Andreas, 37–38, 86, 94n74; on Paul’s concerns in the Pastoral Epistles (PE), 92–93  
 Kümmel, Werner Georg, 36  
 Lake, Kirsopp, 221  
 Laodicea/Laodiceans, 42, 44, 197  
 Lazarus, 227  
*Letter to Flora* (Ptolemy), 161–63, 171, 175; dating of, 161–62  
 Lightfoot, J. B., 91  
 Longenecker, Richard N., 91n60  
*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Hurtado), 62  
*Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Ehrman), 32, 52, 152  
 Luke, 64, 72, 75, 131  
 Luke, Gospel of, 79–80, 86, 130, 132, 139, 141, 148, 188, 211; dating of, 131  
 Lycus Valley, 93  
 Lydia, 98  
 Magnesia, 42, 43  
 Marcion, 26, 26n5, 48, 51–52, 156n8; and the formation of the canon, 113n28, 125–26  
 Marcionism, 26n5; in Edessa, 48–50; nature of, 49  
 Marcus Aurelius, 207  
 Mark, 72, 147  
 Mark, Gospel of, 79, 86, 134, 139, 143, 147, 148, 211, 227; “long ending” of, 220; significant textual variant in, 219

Subject Index

- Marshall, I. Howard, 19, 29n18, 35, 39, 130  
 Martin, Brice, 35–36, 36n48, 38  
 Matthew, 64, 72  
 Matthew, Gospel of, 79, 134, 139–40, 139, 139n50, 141, 143, 146–47, 148, 154, 155, 181, 188; earliest manuscripts of, 211, 211n26  
 McCue, James, 36, 38, 39; on the Valentians, 46  
 McDonald, Lee M., 106–7, 143  
 Meeks, Wayne A., 184, 184n20  
 Meier, John, 131, 166  
 Metzger, Bruce M., 139n50, 142, 148, 158, 208  
 Middle Ages, 169, 175, 210  
*Misquoting Jesus* (Ehrman), 204–5, 213, 220n48, 223, 224  
 monotheism, 38, 78  
 Moses, 114, 119  
 Muratorian Canon, 164, 173  
 Muratorian Fragment, 149, 157–58, 170  
  
 Nag Hammadi documents, 31, 58n68, 62, 152, 165, 166  
 New Testament, 33, 34, 55, 66, 69–70, 79, 81, 133, 137n44, 149, 195; central core of, 138, 156–57, 182, 200n90; concept of the Trinity in, 56–57; dating of New Testament writings, 73n4; distinction of from apocryphal books, 154–55; indebtedness of to the Old Testament, 180–81, 184–85; papyri of, 47n24, 182; as the “true” version of Christianity, 151–52; unity of, 35–36; use of the term “Lord” in, 79n16. *See also* New Testament heretics (Paul’s opponents); New Testament diversity  
 New Testament canon. *See* canon  
 New Testament diversity, 37–38, 38n59, 81–82, 99–101; illegitimate diversity, 89–90; legitimate diversity, 82–83, 100; proposed conflicts concerning, 83–84; resolution of conflicts concerning, 84–89  
 New Testament heretics (Paul’s opponents), 99, 99n95; the “Colossian heresy,” 91–92, 91n62, 92n64, 92nn66–67, 96; the false teachers in Jude, 94–95; the false teachers in 2 Peter, 95–96; in Galatia, 90–91, 91n60; heresies found in Revelation, 97–98; in the Pastoral Epistles, 92–94; the secessionists of 1 John, 96–97  
 New Testament scholarship, “obsolete” categories within, 29  
 New Testament texts, preservation of, 206–7, 211n27, 212n31; dating of New Testament texts, 210–13; historical citations of New Testament texts, 208; quantity of New Testament texts, 207–10, 208n11  
 New Testament texts, textual variations in, 213–14; examples of unresolved variants, 225–27; impact of unresolved variants, 225; insignificant variants, 214–15, 215nn38–39; nature of textual variants, 214–15; nonsense variants, 216; number of textual variants, 214; and the quality of manuscripts, 217–18; reliability of the text critical method to determine textual accuracy, 218; significant variants, 218, 219–20; singular variants, 216; spelling (orthographical) variants, 215, 215–16n42; textual variants and core Christian doctrines, 228, 228n65; theologically motivated variants, 221–25; unresolved variants and biblical authority, 227–30; use of definite articles before proper nouns, 216–17; variants of word order, 216  
 New Testament texts, transmission of, 179–80, 212, 213, 217  
 Newman, John Henry, 53  
 Nicene Creed, 56  
 Nicolaitianism/Nicolaitians, 97, 97n86, 98  
 nomina sacra, the, 191–92, 191n54, 196; appearance of, 191n51; as an indication of organization among Christian communities, 192, 192n56; variants of, 191n52  
 Norris, Frederick, 51  
 Novatian, 54

- Old Testament, 47, 49, 116, 120n46, 127, 133, 161, 163, 233; citations of by the church fathers, 145; messianic hope in, 79; as the origin/substructure of the Gospels and the New Testament, 55–56, 100–101, 109, 180–81, 184–85; reception of as Scripture, 156
- Origen, 46, 54, 162, 163–64, 220; and the books of the canon, 172–73; literary team of, 199; reply to Celsus concerning the education of Christians, 186
- Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, The* (Ehrman), 180, 222, 223
- orthodoxy, 24–25, 31, 35, 61–62, 89–90n52, 99–100, 234; based on Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, 55; challenge of Gnosticism to, 58–62; concept/definition of Christian orthodoxy, 70–71; establishment of early orthodoxy, 35; the "Heresy of Orthodoxy," 16; historical orthodoxy, 28; historical continuity of, 35, 37; indications of in patristic literature, 52–54; new orthodoxy, 16–17; in the patristic era, 54–57, 66–67; Roman orthodoxy, 26, 50; tenets of, 37. *See also* orthodoxy and heresy, in major urban centers; orthodoxy, and the New Testament
- Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Bauer), 17, 24, 105
- orthodoxy and heresy, in major urban centers, 41–42; in Asia Minor, 42–45
- "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians" (McCue), 36
- orthodoxy, and the New Testament: Paul's gospel preaching, 76–77; pre–New Testament liturgical materials related to, 77–78; pre–New Testament liturgical materials related to (confessional formulas), 78–80; pre–New Testament liturgical materials related to (theological standards), 80–81; teachings of Jesus and the apostles, 74–75
- Oxyrhynchus, 47n24
- Pagels, Elaine, 30–31, 39, 126, 152, 153, 233
- Paget, James Carleton, 146
- Palestine, 63
- Pamphilus, 198n80
- Papias, 44, 145, 147–49; acknowledgment of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as authoritative, 147–48; knowledge of the Gospel of John, 148; possible knowledge of the Gospel of Luke, 148; reception of the canonical Gospels by, 148–49
- papyri: classical papyri, 187n31; mix of literary and documentary features in, 187–88, 188n34; New Testament papyri, 47n24, 182, 188; of the second and third centuries, 187
- Paul, 26, 38, 59, 63, 66, 83, 84, 90n57, 98n94, 120n47, 142–43, 159, 229n66; apostolic authority of, 136–37; claims of to apostolic authority, 101; consistency of his theology, 88–89; continuity between Paul and Jesus, 85; convergence between the Lucan Paul and the Paul of the Epistles, 87–88; core message of, 85; doubts concerning the authorship of his letters, 161n18; founding of a church in Ephesus, 45; on the gospel of Christ versus false gospels, 80–81; immersion of in Old Testament writings, 180–81; insistence that his letters be publicly read, 133–34; letters (epistles) of, 127–29, 135, 136–37, 141, 174, 188, 195, 197, 211, 216; nature of his gospel preaching, 76–77; portrayal of in Acts, 84, 87, 88; social status of, 184; use of an amanuensis by, 189; use of the term "Christ" by, 80; use of the term "Scripture" by, 129–32. *See also* New Testament heretics (Paul's opponents)
- Paulinism, 49
- Pearson, Birgir, 47
- Pergamum, 42, 44, 97
- perspectivalism, 16
- Peter, 26, 38, 72, 79, 147, 185; reference of to Paul's letters as "Scripture," 127–29; reference of to written texts, 132–33; view of divine revelation, 132
- Petersen, William E., 211n27
- Philadelphia, 42, 43

Subject Index

- Philippi, 59  
Pickering, Wilbur, 230n68  
Pliny the Younger, 52  
Polycarp, 142–45, 147, 149; acknowledgment of the authority of the apostles, 143; collecting of Ignatius’s letters by, 198–99; letter to the Philippians, 198; letters sent to him by various churches, 198, 198n84; nature of his citations to canonical Gospels, 144–45; personal acquaintance of with John, 143–44, 149; reference to Ephesians as “Scripture,” 142–43; reference to many of Paul’s epistles, 143  
postmodernism, 39, 73, 162  
Ptolemy, 161  
  
“Q” source, 64, 130  
  
Revelation, book of, 42, 211; “inscriptional curse” contained in, 112; public reading of, 133  
Ridderbos, Herman N., 171  
Roberts, Colin, 47, 47n23, 187, 187n31, 193–94n62  
Robinson, James M., 29, 29n18, 30  
Robinson, Thomas, 19, 36–37, 39, 48  
Roman church, the, 16, 25, 41, 50; and the spread of Roman orthodoxy, 26  
Romans, book of, 196–97  
Rome, 42, 48, 59; orthodoxy in, 50–52  
“Rule of Faith” (*regula fidei*), 54, 54n55, 56, 57; as a statement of the church’s common faith, 54–55  
  
Sardis, 42, 44  
Schmithals, Walter, 60  
*Secret Mark*, 72n3  
*Shepherd of Hermas*, 134, 135, 135n39, 164, 170, 171, 190, 197, 200  
Silva, Moisés, 223  
Skeat, T. C., 192, 193–94n62, 194–95, 211n25, 215n41  
Smith, D. Moody, 114–15  
Smyrna, 42, 43, 142; literary activity in, 198–99  
soteriology, 37  
  
spiritual forces, opposition of to the church, 160  
Stanton, Graham, 145  
Strecker, Georg, 33  
Sundberg, A. C., 107–8  
Synoptic Gospels, the, 64, 80, 83–84; relation of the Gospel of John to, 85–87  
Syria, 51  
  
Tacitus, 44, 207, 207n7, 210  
*Teachings of Silvanus*, 46  
Tertius, 189  
Tertullian, 54, 162, 164, 199, 199–200n89  
Textus Receptus, 219  
*Theological Tendency of Codex Cantabrigiensis in Acts, The* (Epp), 221  
Thessalonica, 59  
“Thomas tradition,” the, 48n30  
Thyatira, 42, 44, 98  
Trajan, 52  
*Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Koester and J. Robinson), 29  
Tralles, 42, 43  
Trebilco, Paul, 42–43, 44  
Trinity, the, 56–57  
Trobisch, David, 195  
truth, 15–16  
Turner, E. G., 187n31  
Turner, Henry E. W., 33–35, 38  
  
*Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Dunn), 30  
  
Valentinians, 36, 46  
Valentinus, 36, 45, 46, 161  
Velleius Paterculus, 207, 210  
  
Wallace, Daniel B., 208n11, 215n38  
Wild, Robert, 38  
Wisse, Frederik, 211–12  
Witherington, Ben, 156  
  
Zuntz, Günther, 213n32

## Scripture Index

<b>Genesis</b>		<b>Isaiah</b>		2:15	114
3:15	109	40:3	145	7:1	143
6–9	96	53	69	9:9–13	139
15:18	109	55:3	109	10:1–4	75
17:2	109	63:11	79	10:5–6	85
				13:56	226
<b>Exodus</b>		<b>Jeremiah</b>		14:33	34, 79
12:1–7	114	30:9	79	15:4	130
20:2a	111	31:31	112	15: 24	83, 85
20:2b	111	<b>Ezekiel</b>		16:13–19	74, 101
20:3–17	111	34:23	79	16:16	78, 79
20:5, 6, 7,		37:1	137	16:18	85
11, 12	111	37:25	79	18:17	85
23:20	145	<b>Daniel</b>		20:19	85
26–40	119	7:13	79	20:28	85
31:18	111	<b>Hosea</b>		22:14	146
34:28	109	3:5	79	22:43	137
40:34–38	119	11:1	114	26:37–38	226
<b>Deuteronomy</b>		<b>Habakkuk</b>		26:41	143
4:2	111, 140	2:4	76	26:63–64	79
10:2	111	<b>Zechariah</b>		28:18–20	75
25:4	130	13:7	79	28:19	56, 116
33:5	79	<b>Malachi</b>		<b>Mark</b>	
<b>1 Samuel</b>		3:1	145	1:1	79, 118n39
18:3	109	<b>Matthew</b>		1:2–3	145
20:16	109	1:1	79	1:10	86
<b>2 Samuel</b>		2:1–4	79	1:13	226
7:14	79			1:14	219
<b>Psalms</b>				1:16	217
4:5	142			1:20	185
22	79			1:41	227

Scripture Index

3:5	227	1:29	114	7:42-43	46
3:13-15	75	1:32	86	7:48-50	46
3:14-15	115	1:40	87	7:52	46
3:32	225	1:41	80	8:3	87
6:7-13	75	1:49	80	8:37	34
6:32-44	86	3:14	80	9	87
6:45-52	86	3:24	87	9:1	87
7:9	226	4:25, 29	80	9:15	85
7:10	130	4:44	87	9:20	79
8:27-30	74	6:1-15	86	10:41-42	115
8:29	34, 78, 79	6:16-21	86	11:26	50
9:28	159	6:66-69	74	13:15	133
10:14	227	6:67, 71	87	13:46-48	88
10:45	85	7	60n77	14:23	60
14:34	226	7:15	185	15	51, 75, 83,
14:38	143	7:25-44	80		91
14:61-62	79	7:27	80	15:1	90
15:39	79	7:31	80	15:21	133
15:42	86	7:40-44	80	16:14	98
16:8	220	8:28	80	20:28	60
16:9	220	9:22	80	20:28-31	93
16:9-20	220	10:27	123	20:34	88
22:43-44	228n65	10:30	64, 80	21:8-9	44
<b>Luke</b>		10:34-39	80	22	87
1:1	83, 144	11:1-2	87	22:3	87
1:1-4	118n39	11:27	34, 78, 80	23:6	87
1:2	72	11:33	227	26	87
1:35	79	12:34	80	26:5	87
1:72	109	13:1	216	28:3	88
2:11	79	17:12	216	28:25-28	88
2:26	79	17:15	216		
2:33	221	19:14	86	<b>Romans</b>	
4:17-20	133, 185	19:31	86	1:1-3	76
5:2, 7	185	19:40	222	1:5	77
6:13	75	20:21	115	1:6	88
6:38	143	20:21-22, 44	75	1:16-17	76
9:1-2	75	20:28	78, 80	2:9-10	88
9:18-20	74	20:30-31	80, 96	3:21-22	76
9:22	85	20:31	79	5:1	215-16n42
9:31	114	21:24	118n39	5:20	88
10:7	130, 130n16			8:9	95
10:16	115	<b>Acts</b>		9:5	80
22:1	86	1:20	130	10:9	34, 78
22:20	109, 114	1:21-22	75	10:12	88
22:43-44	226	2:36	78, 79	11:13	85
24:26-27	79	2:42	75, 83, 95	12-13	85
24:44-47	79	4:13	183, 185	12-15	120
24:45-48	75	5:35	87	15:18-19	87
		6:5	97n86	15:24	85
<b>John</b>		7	46	16:1	196
1:1-3	65, 80	7:38-42a	46	16:17	81

Scripture Index

16:22	189	1:14	87	2:20	92
16:25–26	85	1:15	87	2:21	92
16:26	85	1:17	87	3:11	88
<b>1 Corinthians</b>		2:4	94	4:7	196
1:10—4:7	95	2:9	51	4:12	43
1:22, 24	88	2:11–14	100	4:13	43
2:1–5	87	2:15–16	90	4:14	131
2:14	95	2:20	87	4:16	118n39, 133, 196, 197
3:6	80	3:1	90, 159	4:18	189n43
5–12	120	3:15–19	88	<b>1 Thessalonians</b>	
7:12	118n39, 129	3:19–24	90	2:9	88
8:4–6	63, 78	3:28	84, 88	2:13	118n39, 129
9:1	87	5:7	90	4:15	85
9:5	94	5:11	189n43	5:27	133, 196
9:14	85	6:12	90	<b>2 Thessalonians</b>	
9:18	88	<b>Ephesians</b>		2:13	121
9:19–23	88	1:1	78	2:15	81, 116
11:20–22	95	3:2–11	85	3:7–8	88
11:23–26	85	4:26	142	3:17	189n43
12:13	88	5:25–26	120	<b>1 Timothy</b>	
13:8–12	88	6:21	196	1:3	93
14:37–38	118	<b>Philippians</b>		1:7–11	93
15:1–5	76	1:1	60	1:13	87
15:3	121	2:6	78	1:19–20	94
15:3–4	28, 81, 85, 181	2:6–8	80	1:20	93
15:3–6	63	2:6–11	63, 77	2:12	84
15:8	87	2:8	78	2:15	93
15:9	87	2:9–11	78	3:16	96, 222, 223
15:12, 34	93, 94	2:11	34, 78	4:1–5	93
15:21–22	109	3:5	87	4:3	93
15:25–26	80	3:6	87	4:13	134
16:21	189n43	3:12–16	88	5:18	126n4, 129, 131, 138, 140
16:22	80	<b>Colossians</b>		6:2	93
<b>2 Corinthians</b>		1:7–8	43	6:20	60, 93
1:19	79	1:15–18	78	<b>2 Timothy</b>	
2:9	196	1:15, 19	78	2:14	93
4:6	87	1:15–20	77, 78, 80	2:17–18	93, 94, 95
6–9	120	1:20	78	3:16	122
10:9	133	1:25–27	85	4:11	131
11:5	159	2:1–3:4	91	4:13	181
11:22	87	2:6	34, 78	<b>Titus</b>	
<b>Galatians</b>		2:8	91, 92	1:5	60, 93
1:1	129, 118n39	2:8, 16–23	93	1:10	93
1:6	83, 90	2:9	91		
1:6–9	80, 100	2:11, 13, 16, 20–21	91		
1:7–9	90	2:16–17	93		
1:11–12	80	2:18	91, 92		
1:13, 22–23	87	2:18–23	93		

Scripture Index

1:10, 14	93	2:1, 13	95	<b>3 John</b>	
1:11	93	2:10, 14	95	4	94
1:13	93	2:13, 19	95	5–10	94
1:14	93	2:22	130	8	94
1:15–16	93	3:2	115, 132, 132n28,	<b>Jude</b>	
3:9	93		133, 134, 147	4	94
3:10	93			6	95
4:2	93	3:3–4	96	8	95
<b>Philemon</b>		3:4	95	9–10	95
24	131	3:16	118n39, 126n4, 127, 128, 133, 138, 140	11	95
<b>Hebrews</b>				12	95
1:3	80	<b>1 John</b>		12–13	95
1:8	80	1:1–5	97	17	79
2:2–3	116	1:3–5	118n39	19	95
2:17–18	226	1:5	81	23	95
4:12	122	1:6	81	<b>Revelation</b>	
8:6–13	109	2:19	96	1:1–3	118n39
10:29	79	2:20	60	1:10	137
<b>James</b>		2:22–23	96, 97	2:1–7	45
1:18, 21	120	3:8	79	2:6, 15	97
3:14	95	4:2–3	96, 60n77	2:8–11	43
3:15	95	4:15	96	2:14	97
4:5	95	5:1, 5	96	2:20	97, 98
<b>1 Peter</b>		5:6	97	2:20–21	98
1:2	56	5:7	220n48	2:24	98
1:3	79	5:7–8	219	3:7–11	43
2:5	120	<b>2 John</b>		3:14–22	44
2:6	130	7	96	12:13–17	160
5:2	60	9	61	21–22	120
<b>2 Peter</b>		10	94	22:18–19	112, 118n39
1:1	128			22:20	80
1:16	95				