

The Rehabilitation of Heresy: “Misquoting” Earliest Christianity: Part 1

Dr. Rodney J. Decker
Professor of Greek and New Testament
Baptist Bible Seminary
Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania

The following essay¹ is part one of a two-part series. Due to the nature of the argument, much of part one consists of a summary of a non-orthodox position. This is necessary prior to the critique which will be found primarily, though not exclusively, in part two.

And he spoke a parable unto them, saying, there once was a certain man named Joe. He taught many things which were quite different from things taught by his contemporaries. Those who heard him were impressed with his wisdom. Some even thought he was more than a mere man. After he died his ideas were developed by other people, not all of whom were as insightful as Joe. As a result, many divergent groups developed in different places, each claiming to represent Joe’s “true” teaching, despite the fact that they taught very different things and had very different views as to who Joe was. This continued for several centuries, but eventually one of the groups, the Joeists, was able to dominate the others through political savvy, lots of cash, administrative skill, and outright force. Once they had achieved power, the Joeists ruthlessly persecuted the other groups, destroyed their writings, and sought to obliterate

¹ This essay was first presented at the Bible Faculty Summit, July 2007 at Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis. The present expanded edition responds to interaction from the conference, extends the argumentation and documentation in a number of areas, and fills in some gaps in the original paper. I am indebted both to Andy Hudson’s formal response at the conference, to extensive interaction later with Dr. Paul Hartog, to suggestions from Dr. John Makujina and Dr. Tommy Wasserman, and to discussions with both PhD and MDiv students at Baptist Bible Seminary.

rate their very memory. The winners in this very nasty ideological war then proceeded to rewrite history to make it appear as if the Joeists had been the only group in existence from the very beginning. They revised the early documents that told about Joe to make them sound like Joe taught exactly what the Joeists believed. They compiled these modified documents into an official literary corpus and allowed people to read only from this sanctioned anthology. In addition they wrote very strict definitions as to what people were allowed to believe and say about Joe. And so Joeism became a new world religion, spreading across the planet, but always tightly controlled by the original leaders in Joeville.

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

My parable, of course, is fictional, but far closer to reality than one might think. One only need change “Joe” to “Jesus,” “Joeism” to “Orthodoxy” (particularly Roman Catholic ortho-

doxy), and “intellectual freedom fighters” to “modern Jesus scholars” to have a fairly accurate picture of much recent discussion regarding Jesus and the history of the early church. The controversy regarding Jesus is certainly not new; it dates back now several centuries.² Players and positions shift and morph over time, but one constant remains: the belief that the Jesus of orthodox Christianity cannot be who the church claims that he is.

Surprisingly, the recent popularity of a radically revised history of Christianity based on long lost documents is not new. Jenkins summarizes an often-forgotten history of such sources and proposals which have been “a perennial phenomenon within Western culture since the Enlightenment.”³ The impetus for the recent outbreak of speculation has not been the discovery of new data very different from what we have known for a long time. Rather it is, according to Jenkins, a philosophi-

² For an overview of the various “Jesus Quests,” see Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*; later titled *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 2nd German ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913); ET, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery et al., 2nd English ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1931; numerous reprints including, New York: Macmillan, 1957); Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds. *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997); and idem, *What Have They Done with Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), and, on a broader scale, William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 2 vols. [3 projected] (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 2003).

³ Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 15; see his summary on pp. 13–15.

cal/ideological shift in Western culture: the rise of postmodernism and its entailments.⁴ The anti-authority thrust of postmodernism and particularly the view of documentary authority as a means of oppression (thus the rejection of authorial intent and the advocacy of deconstructionism) has spawned a widespread acceptance of various conspiracy theories accusing the church (usually the Roman Catholic Church) of suppressing primitive truth. Ironically, these “new” approaches seek to accomplish the same end (i.e., suppressing truth), only now it is the NT texts that are deprived and the “lost gospels” are virtually canonized with the result that these pseudepigraphal texts are granted supreme value and accuracy. Jenkins refers to this as “a kind of inverted fundamentalism, a loving consecration of the noncanonical.”⁵

One of the current writers in the media spotlight is Bart Ehrman. He is not the first nor only voice advocating a radical overhaul of our conception of early Christianity.⁶ He has been,

⁴ Ibid., 15–20. Jenkins also lists feminism along with postmodernity, but that connection is not explored in this paper. For Jenkins’s discussion of the feminist connection, see *Hidden Gospels*, 124–47, 169–77. There are likely other reasons for the contemporary speculation beyond the two major factors noted here, but I have not attempted to track all such aspects, being content with noting a few of the most significant issues.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Although I have not read most of the relatively recent works in the following list, my impression is that they are all similar popularizations of the same hypothesis: G. J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); John Dart, *The Jesus of Heresy and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

however, one of the more visible and influential voices.⁷ This is due to several factors. First, he is a credentialed scholar in a related discipline, NT textual criticism. In this regard he seems to have benefited from his association with the “dean” of that field, Bruce Metzger.⁸ He is also a good writer and effective communicator. In addition, he has achieved broad media exposure for his popularization of more scholarly work.⁹ His major publications relevant to the history of early Christianity include the following.

- *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (1993)
- *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (2003)
- *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (2003)

⁷ My original goal in this paper turned out to be an audacious one: to provide a concise but careful critique of Ehrman’s *Lost Christianities*. As it turns out, the topic is much larger than I initially suspected. As a result, what I have produced is a survey of some of the major issues involved in such an endeavor. The taller my piles of books and articles have grown over the months I worked on this paper, the more I have realized the magnitude of the subject matter, both in terms of scope and significance. The real issues are not in Ehrman, though he builds on them; he is only the most recent popularizer of much older ideas. Perhaps this record of my explorations (and excavations!) in the piles that have accumulated in my study of late will be of help in orienting others to the issues which Ehrman’s writings have raised.

⁸ Ehrman was one of Metzger’s last two PhD students in textual criticism at Princeton (the other being Michael Holmes), and he was selected to prepare the most recent revision of Metzger’s standard textbook, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford, 2005).

⁹ Ehrman has been featured on NPR, served as a consultant for major media specials on related topics (e.g., the Gospel of Judas), and achieved significant rankings on bestseller lists.

- *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005)

The thesis which Ehrman proposes runs as follows, in his own words. After listing a wide range of phenomena in the diverse groups comprising “Christendom”¹⁰—including everything from Roman Catholic missionaries, snake handlers, Greek Orthodoxy, fundamentalists, mainline churches, to David Koresh—Ehrman writes,

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ The use of “Christendom” is my term, intended to be understood as a very broad cover term for any and all groups that profess any form of allegiance to Jesus and/or the term Christian. Ehrman calls it simply “Christianity”—with no consideration as to how that ought to be defined.

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

It is striking that, for centuries, virtually everyone who studied the history of early Christianity simply accepted the version of the early conflicts written by the orthodox victors. This all began to change in a significant way in the nineteenth century as some scholars began to question the “objectivity” of such early Christian writers as the fourth-century orthodox writer Eusebius, the so-called Father of Church History, who reproduced for us the earliest account of the conflict. This initial query into Eusebius’ accuracy eventually became, in some circles, a virtual onslaught on his character, as twentieth-century scholars began to subject his work to an ideological critique that exposed his biases and their role in his presentation. This reevaluation of Eusebius was prompted, in part, by the discovery of additional ancient books ... other Gospels, for example, that also claimed to be written in the names of apostles.¹¹

Ehrman is quite right that this is not the traditional portrait of early Christianity. But it is by no means original with him, though he has done as much to popularize it as anyone in recent years. The real credit for this view of history belongs to Walter Bauer,¹² so though we will return to Ehrman’s tributary later, we turn first to the fountain and examine Bauer’s thesis.

¹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 1, 4, 5.

¹² It is possible that the core of Bauer’s ideas are much older; Brown refers to Semler’s contention that “the present canon is arbitrary and represents the victory of the Roman see in the ecclesiastical politics of the early church” (Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 71, citing Johann Semler, *Abhan-*

BAUER'S ORTHODOXY AND HERESY (1934)

Brilliant, profound, extremely well read, indefatigable—all accurate descriptions of the German scholar to whom we owe much. Although I will take sharp issue with Bauer's thesis under consideration, I have a great respect for his lexical work¹³—as we all should since this is the same Bauer represented by the initial 'B' in BDAG—Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. No serious work in NT exegesis is possible without reference to this lexicon, whether the third English edition¹⁴ or the sixth German

dlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons [Halle: Hemmerde, 1776], but no page reference is given; I have not had access to Semler's work to see if the idea is developed further).

There are definitely other contributing factors, most of which are closer at hand than Semler's 18th-century work. Michel Desjardins comments that Bauer's "study was a natural extension of a preceding century's scholarly work," listing the Tübingen school (F. C. Baur), the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, and Harnack's work on heresy and the Gnostics as direct contributors to the thesis of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* ("Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Αἵρεσις in the Early Christian Era," *SecCent* 8 [1991]: 67–68). See also Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 11 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988), 15–18, who qualifies the nature of the relationship between Tübingen/F. C. Baur and Walter Bauer's argument.

¹³ My extensive tribute to BDAG may be found at <www.NTResources.com/bdag.html>. It should be noted that Danker's contributions to the English edition are at least equally valuable with Bauer's original work.

¹⁴ Edited by Fredrick Danker (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2000). The first English translation, known as "BAG," had appeared in 1957, based on the fourth German edition. The second English edition of 1979 ("BAGD") was based on the fifth edition of the German work. See n. 16.

edition.¹⁵ But before the professor from Göttingen turned his attention to lexicography¹⁶ Walter Bauer (1877–1960) published several works on the history of the early church including a 1903 study of the Syrian canon of the epistles in the fourth and 5th centuries¹⁷ and another in 1909 of Jesus in the apocrypha.¹⁸ Bauer published a major work in 1934 which has had major influence in its field: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*¹⁹—a “paradigm-shaping book.”²⁰ Although widely

¹⁵ *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, ed. Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, and Victor Reichmann, 6th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988).

¹⁶ Bauer was the editor for the 1928, second edition of Preuschen’s lexicon with the third edition of 1937 bearing Bauer’s name alone. The fourth edition in 1949–52 was the most significant revision, followed by a fifth edition, the last edited by Bauer, in 1957–58; a sixth edition of the German work appeared in 1988 (see n. 15). For a more detailed history of BDAG, see Appendix A, “Using BDAG” in my *Koine Greek Reader* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007). Jerry Flora’s dissertation provides a broad review of Bauer’s life and scholarly career: “A Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer’s Theory of Early Christian Orthodoxy and Heresy” (ThD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 23–35.

¹⁷ *Der Apostolos der Syrer in der Zeit von der Mitte des vierten Jahrhunderts bis zur Spaltung der Syrischen Kirche* [The Apostolos of the Syrians from the Middle of the fourth century to the division of the Syrian Church] (Geissen: Ricker/Töpelmann, 1903).

¹⁸ *Das Leben Jesu: Im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* [The Life of Jesus: In the time of the NT Apocrypha] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

¹⁹ *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 10 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1934; 2nd ed., ed. G. Strecker, Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1964). The text of the two editions is essentially the same with only typographical corrections; the major difference is the addition of two essays by Strecker in the second edition.

²⁰ D. Jeffery Bingham, “Development and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 50.

discussed on the Continent and in England,²¹ it was not until the release of an English translation almost forty years later that its impact was felt in America.²² Since that time it has influenced almost every discussion of the topic.²³ *Orthodoxy and Heresy* is not a full statement of Bauer's ideas regarding the origins of orthodoxy and heresy, but this essay does not allow a broader discussion of Bauer's other writings.²⁴

Summary of Bauer's Thesis²⁵

Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* argues that we cannot merely assume that orthodoxy came first and that heresy is a later deviation for in doing so we "simply agree with the judgment of the

²¹ See Appendix 2, "The Reception of the Book" by Georg Strecker in the English edition of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (286–316) for a listing of reviews and an extensive discussion of reactions to Bauer's German work.

²² *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; repr., Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1996).

²³ A surprising exception is the 500-page work on heresy by H. O. J. Brown (*Heresies*). I can find no citation of Bauer in the footnotes and he is not listed in the index. Although one chapter bibliography lists the title (chap. 2, p. 22), there is no interaction with Bauer in the chapter.

²⁴ For a survey of the relevant material from Bauer's previous books and articles, see Hans Deiter Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity," *Int.* 19 (1965): 299–311.

²⁵ In this section references to the English translation of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* are given parenthetically (as is also the case in other summaries that follow). The sketch given here cannot be complete due to limitations of space, but the main lines of Bauer's argument are traced, though without much of his supporting evidence. I have tried to make the summary just that and refrain from critique at this point. When I could not restrain, I have added my comment in a footnote. The reader is encouraged to read Bauer before speaking authoritatively on his position.

anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period” (xxi). This is neither scientific nor fair since we are listening to only one voice—that of the winners; we do not allow the losers to speak for themselves.

Perhaps ... certain manifestations of Christian life that the authors of the church renounce as “heresies” originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply “Christianity.” The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority. (xxii)

This is the hypothesis that Bauer proposes to test, though as has been pointed out, Bauer’s professed neutral critical method too frequently slips into the role of defense lawyer or apologist for the heretics rather than impartial judge of the evidence.²⁶ The evidence he examines in subsequent chapters is considered geographically, area by area, to determine the evidence for what form/s of Christianity are attested in the earliest discernible period. Bauer begins with Edessa and follows with Egypt, Antioch, Asia Minor, and Rome.

Syrian Edessa, located on a tributary of the Euphrates just north of the present north-central border of Turkey and Syria, is the focus of Bauer’s first chapter. After discrediting all traditional accounts of the origins of Christianity in Edessa, Bauer argues that the original form of Christianity there was Marcionite, and that not until mid-second century, followed by Bardesanes and his followers shortly afterwards. It was not until the end of the second century that there is any trace of what came later to be

²⁶ I have read similar statements several times and do not know who originated the analogy. For two representative instances, see James Moffat, “Review of Professor Bauer’s *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*,” *ExpTim* 45 (1933–34): 475 (“he tends to take the position of the barrister rather than of the judge”); and Michel Desjardins, “Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Αἵρεσις in the Early Christian Era,” *SecCent* 8 (1991): 68 n. 9 (“his professed impartiality shifts at times to an apologist on behalf of the ‘heretics’”).

known as orthodoxy, and the orthodox remained a small minority through the fourth century. Only in the fifth century is orthodoxy finally imposed on Edessa by the “rather coarse methods” of Bishop Rabbula, the “tyrant of Edessa” (27). The “beginnings for the history of Christianity in Edessa ... rests on an unmistakably heretical basis” (43).

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

Bauer then turns to Antioch, which, though seeming to the reader of the NT to be the bastion of orthodoxy,²⁷ has long been heavily influenced by heretical movements. Since the time of Paul’s defeat there (Gal 2), Antioch “played no significant role in the history of the church” (63)—that is the orthodox church. Instead there was a syncretistic mixture of “Jewish Christianity,” Gentile Christianity [i.e., what was left of Paul’s influence], and Gnosticism. Not until the “frantic concern” (63) of Ignatius in the early second century is there a renewed attempt to reestablish orthodoxy. Ignatius, however, is not a reliable source since his exuberance causes him to lose “all sense of proportion ... [so] one must be especially careful in evaluating the accuracy of his statements” (61). His attempt to impose a powerful monarchical bishop structure on the church is a political move by someone in a minority position attempting to gain power and control (62).

²⁷ Bauer declines to consider NT evidence since it “seems to be both too unproductive and too much disputed to be able to serve as a point of departure” (*Orthodoxy and Heresy*, xxv).

Asia Minor also shows unmistakable Gnostic influence, and that *within* the churches, as may be seen in John's letters.²⁸ Ignatius's letters to churches in Asia Minor are also relevant here since they reflect the limit of his influence: he can expect to be heard in only a few churches, and even then he is attempting to "stretch the circle of his influence as widely as possible" (79). It is significant that four of the churches in the area which had earlier received letters from John are not included in Ignatius's list; since these are the churches most severely rebuked by John, it is evident that they have moved into full blown heresy by the time of Ignatius (78–79). That Hierapolis and Colossae are "bypassed in icy silence by both John and Ignatius" (80) further reflects the lack of influence of orthodoxy in this area. Peter likewise is very selective in his address to the churches of Asia Minor (1 Pet 1:1), leaving large "blank spots on the map" of Asian orthodoxy: "there simply was nothing to be gained for 'ecclesiastically' oriented Christianity in that area at that time" (82). Even Ephesus, often perceived as the bastion of Pauline orthodoxy, has been lost to that cause by the end of the first century, perhaps to the extent that Paul's foundational labors there had been forgotten: Paul "lost the contest in Ephesus" (85), something that was becoming evident even during Paul's lifetime. Orthodoxy was reorganized only much later when the Apostle John became their patron, likely due to the arrival of Jewish Christians (including John and Philip) from Jerusalem following the war with Rome. Yet even this did not result in an orthodox victory since the Pastorals still reflect a major problem with Gnosticism in the second century (89).

Next Bauer considers the Roman church and its tactics in establishing its particular brand of Christianity as the dominant form worldwide. The initial foray in this direction is Bauer's

²⁸ John the "apocalyptic seer" is not very useful for the current question according to Bauer since his "extremely confused religious outlook that peculiarly mixes Jewish, Christian, and mythological elements and ends up in chiliasm [a] stormy outburst, seething with hate" marks him, not as an intellectual, spiritual leader of influence, but only "wishful thinking" (Ibid., 77–78).

study of 1 Clement, the letter from the church of Rome to the Corinthian church written near the end of the first century. We cannot trust the direct statements of this biased letter, says Bauer, but must read between the lines to reconstruct the actual situation which prompted the letter and decipher the real motivation for Rome's letter: "Rome takes action not when it is overflowing with love or when the great concerns of the faith are really in jeopardy, but when there is at least the opportunity of enlarging its own sphere of influence" (97-98). The first evidence we have of this Roman strategy is in relation to the church at Corinth, reflected in the letter of 1 Clement. In that situation "internal discord greatly reduced the power of resistance of the Corinthian church, so that it seemed to be easy prey" (98). The specifics there involve the usurpation of the existing church leaders by younger ones; Rome writes in an effort to reinstate the older leaders who were more favorable to the Roman position. The conflict goes all the way back to Paul. Those rebuked by him as "the strong" were Gnostics who, though silenced at the time, had gradually increased in number (their position was more attractive to the community than Paul's approach) though they chafed under the repressive leadership of the church. By the time of 1 Clement they had become strong enough to oust the leaders (which by this time were a coalition of the Paul and Cephas parties) and take over the church (100-101), perhaps even imposing an "energetic bishop" on the previously plural presbyterate (112). "Rome succeeded in imposing its will on Corinth" to the extent that a half century later the Corinthian church still accepted Roman authority and read 1 Clement in their services (104). And so began the Roman movement to consolidate her authority one church at a time, culminating in the exclusive establishment of Rome's brand of Christianity, now branded as "orthodoxy," in the fourth century.

The Roman juggernaut evidenced itself in later claims of apostolic succession used, not only in Rome, but elsewhere under Roman influence in the fight against heresy. Rome also extended her influence through teaching Christians in other places and also through generous financial gifts—and "such gifts were not the least reason why their opponents emerged victorious" (122, seeming to imply that Rome's opponents were "bought").

Bauer cites Eusebius's (much later) comment as reflective of a practice that had been operative earlier as well:

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

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

Traditional literature is treated next; the use of the OT as well as divergent gospels: "At that point there probably was no version of Christianity worthy of note that did not have at its disposal at least *one* written gospel, in which Jesus appears as the bearer and guarantor of that particular view" (203). Though the other gospels were accepted fairly early (especially Mark and Matthew), John's gospel was viewed with suspicion in orthodox Rome almost from the start (208). It was rather the preferred gospel of the Gnostics and other heretics. Bauer asserts,

“When the gospel canon was defined, which was to be valid for the entire church, Rome found itself overruled, to put it rather crudely” (212).²⁹

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

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

... I am inclined to see the pastoral Epistles as an attempt on the part of the church unambiguously to enlist Paul as part of its anti-heretical front and to eliminate the lack of confidence in him in ecclesiastical circles.... The church raised up the Paul of orthodoxy by using [pseudonymous] means....

The price the Apostle of the Gentiles had to pay to be allowed to remain in the church was the complete surrender of his personality and historical particularity.... Whenever the “church” becomes powerful, the bottom drops out from under him and he must immediately give way to the celebrities from the circle of the twelve apostles.... To some extent Paul becomes influential only as part of the holy scriptures acknowledged in the church—not the personality of the Apostle to the Gentiles and his proclamation, but the *word* of Paul ... whenever it is useful for the development and preservation of ecclesiastical teaching.... The introduction of the pastoral Epistles actually made the collection of Paul’s letters ecclesiastically viable for the very first time. (225–28 *passim*)

Paul seems to fare quite poorly in the hands of Bauer’s early orthodoxy. This is largely because of what Bauer perceives to be Paul’s “as yet quite rudimentary organization of thought

²⁹ This is a rather ironic statement in Bauer regarding the church which otherwise exercised such authoritarian power!

patterns" (234), but even more because of his plasticity and tolerance. Not only could he be used by so many diverse groups, he "scarcely knows what a heretic might be" (234). He knows that many other Christians disagree with him—and that is fine with him. It is only the "most serious moral deviation" (235) that upsets him. Even when he felt opposing positions to be "defective, he still did not detest and condemn them as heretical" (237).³⁰

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

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

The essence, then, of Bauer's thesis is two-fold: in the beginning there were many varieties of Christianity (i.e., not a single,

³⁰ In regard to passages that seem to contradict this portrait of Paul, Bauer adds a footnote: "The thrust of the polemic in Phil. 3 and in Rom. 16.17-20 is not entirely clear—or in any event, can be interpreted in different ways—and may be left aside at this point" (236 n. 11). In other words, I ignore what isn't convenient for my theory! For a careful consideration of Paul's influence vis-à-vis Bauer, though in this case in the context of Philippi, see Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament*, WUNT 2.134 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2002), 216-22. For Paul's influence on Polycarp, see Kenneth Berding, "Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of Their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp's Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2000).

unified set of beliefs that later became what we know as orthodoxy), and second, it was the victory of one party, the church of Rome, which established the official dogma, suppressing all other competing views.³¹

RESPONSES TO BAUER

In an essay of this length it is obviously impossible to respond fully to a substantial book like Bauer's. Rather I will summarize some of the key responses that have been posed in some detail by others, both as a direction for further reading and as a summary of the verdict of the three-quarters century that has elapsed since *Orthodoxy and Heresy* was first published.³² In one sense this section might be viewed as superfluous since the professed purpose of this essay is a critique of Ehrman, not Bauer. It is justified, however, by the fact that Ehrman *assumes* the validity of Bauer's thesis. If Bauer is not reliable, then Ehrman's approach is cut off at the knees since he does not attempt to provide the level of justification and

³¹ See the similar summary in both Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 176 (172–75 in greater detail); James F. McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," *VC* 33 (1979): 119–20; and Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 49–50.

³² I give, for the most part, only the conclusions and do not attempt to detail all the supporting evidence in these critiques. Also note that I have included only reviews that are critical of some aspect of Bauer's thesis. Since I am persuaded that most of Bauer's work is misguided, and that the studies discussed here demonstrate that quite clearly, it is not necessary to list the few areas in which I might agree with his analysis or note other scholars who do the same. For an extended discussion of (largely positive) responses, see Georg Strecker's appendix in the English translation of Bauer, "The Reception of the Book" (286–316). These are, of course, only the earlier responses to the German edition.

documentation for his system as does Bauer. The most significant critiques of Bauer, in historical order, are the following.³³

Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (1954)

The first major critique of Bauer was Turner's *The Pattern of Christian Truth*³⁴—the Bampton Lectures for 1954. The 500+ pages present Turner's "equivalent" of Bauer's study, but chapter two is an explicit critique of Bauer. His analysis follows Bauer's geographical outline. In regards to Edessa he concludes that "the evidence is too scanty and in many respects too flimsy to support any theory so trenchant and clear-cut as Bauer proposes" and "his skepticism on many points of detail appears excessive" (45). Turning to Egypt, he proposes that there is more literary evidence than Bauer has acknowledged (some of it unknown in Bauer's day, but not all): "Most of the new discoveries have the effect of moving what we know of Alexandrine Christianity further to the right" (i.e., toward a more orthodox view). The greater probability is that the evidence Bauer examined is to be understood as representative of "splinter groups on the fringe of the Church" (57). All told, there is less evidence

³³ For broad-ranging surveys of reviews published since 1934, see the articles by Daniel J. Harrington, "The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* During the Last Decade," *HTR* 73 (1980): 289–98 and Michel Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Αἰρεσις in the Early Christian Era," *SecCent* 8 (1991): 65–82. For a review of earlier responses to the German edition, see Strecker's article listed in n. 21. Another work that is sometimes listed as a critique of Bauer is Arland Hultgren's *The Rise of Normative Christianity*, but though disagreeing with Bauer, it is not a particularly focused critique—and many of Hultgren's proposals, building on James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester's *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1971; repr, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), are also problematic.

³⁴ H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church*, Bampton Lectures 1954 ([London]: Mowbray, 1954; repr, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

for Bauer's thesis from Alexandria than from Edessa (59). Likewise in Asia Minor there is nothing which "supports the more daring features of Bauer's reconstruction" (63). The picture Bauer draws of Corinth, Rome, and 1 Clement "is at best non-proven" (67). As will others who follow, Turner charges Bauer with a "misuse of the argument from silence. If we have no evidence for the fact, we can hardly offer any profitable conjecture about its alleged cause" (67). Turner's final verdict is that Bauer's "fatal weakness appears to be a persistent tendency to oversimplify problems, combined with the ruthless treatment of such evidence as fails to support his case" (79).

Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity" (1965)

Although basically in agreement with Bauer's approach, Betz has pointed out two significant problems. First, on Egypt, Bauer got it wrong: there was a strong Gnostic presence, but that is not the only form of Christianity seen there. Second, he ignored the NT evidence; in particular, he "clearly underestimates Paul's fight against his opponents. Bauer overlooks the fact that Paul claims to be 'orthodox.' Wherever Paul argues in his letters, he does it to prove that his theological understanding is in accordance with the kerygma itself."³⁵

Chapman, "Some Theological Reflections on Walter Bauer's *RKAC*" (1970)

Chapman's review article was published prior to the release of the English translation of Bauer.³⁶ He poses two major criticisms: numerous arguments from silence ("habitually sees many gaps in our records as significant or ominous"), and "habitually

³⁵ Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity," 306–308 (direct quotation from 308).

³⁶ G. Clarke Chapman, "Some Theological Reflections on Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*: A Review Article," *JES* 7 (1970): 564–74.

coercing ambiguous pieces of evidence” to fit a preconceived theory (567). Bauer is also overly skeptical of Eusebius and other Fathers who defend the traditional view, yet “gives immediate and weighty credence to the slightest reference by the church fathers to widespread or predominating heresy” (567; he later uses the phrase “Eusebius demythologized,” 569). Chapman also rejects Bauer’s portrait of “power politics and sociological pressures” emanating from Rome, suggesting instead that we ought to consider the possibility that the victory of orthodoxy is related to providence: “certain broad lines of interpretation may have triumphed because of their theological adequacy” (572), though he realizes that “historians” have trouble dealing with such categories.

Flora, “Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer’s Theory” (1972)

One of the first full-length critiques of Bauer from an American writer was the dissertation presented at Southern Baptist Seminary in 1972 by Jerry Flora.³⁷ Although Southern was not at that time a conservative school, and though in some sympathy for Bauer’s work, Flora nevertheless leveled some stiff criticism against Bauer’s thesis, which he viewed as a one-sided over-reaction to the traditional, Eusebian view of heresy. As a result his conclusions need to be substantially modified (though not rejected out of hand).

There were four major criticisms. First, Bauer’s view of Paul is misguided. Rather than a “tolerant” apostle who became “all things to all men” and “did not know what a heretic might be” (105), Paul claimed to be orthodox in contradistinction to others whom he pronounced quite decidedly to be wrong (106): “He plainly conceived himself to be an authorized apostle and his doctrine to be correct, as over against that of his unnamed opponents” (107). Second, Bauer was selective in the evidence cited and the areas of the early church discussed: Edessa and Egypt are crucial, followed in importance by second-century

³⁷ Jerry Flora, “A Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer’s Theory of Early Christian Orthodoxy and Heresy” (ThD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972).

Antioch and western Asia Minor. But, Flora asks, “what of the origin and development of Christianity in Judea (Jerusalem), in western Syria (Antioch), in Gaul (Lyons), in Africa (Carthage), and in Italy (Rome)? Here are other regions important to the life of the church by the close of the second century, but he did not analyze their origins, nor did he say why he chose not to” (113).³⁸ Though Bauer may have been able to offer a plausible argument for the priority of heresy in some areas, he conveniently ignores those areas not compatible with his thesis. Third, to argue that orthodoxy only gradually developed later after a long struggle with prior heresy is an over-simplified picture (115–24). Fourth, that Rome imposed its brand of Christianity on other churches assumes that the church in Rome was unified in the second century, but this flies in the face of the evidence for considerable diversity in Rome (125–30). Many of the early heretics were associated with Rome, including Simon Magus, Valentinus, Marcion, Apelles, Praxes, Theodotus, and Sabellius (131). “Prior to the time of Irenaeus and Victor, Rome was scarcely the juggernaut that Bauer described. It was a divided community, trying to find its way into an uncertain future The doctrine of Rome could not alone and automatically guarantee orthodoxy” (138).

Flora also develops an argument regarding the evidence for continuity between the first century church, and particularly the apostolic church, and the second century church:

To maintain that orthodoxy was a late development which triumphed only with great difficulty seems to be saying too much. While it may have emerged *in strength* comparatively late and not without struggle, orthodoxy existed in continuity with the commitment and purpose of the first two generations of the Christian movement. That apostolic witness with its historical perspective became the foundation on which Catholicism built and at the same time the stumbling block over which the heresies fell. (149)

³⁸ In the two overlaps in this list (Antioch and Rome), Flora intends the second list to refer to the *origin* of these churches in the first century. Bauer discusses both cities/churches, but only in the second century and later.

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

Rather than addressing the entire scope of Bauer’s thesis, most subsequent studies have focused on individual aspects of it. One of the first of these was Heron’s examination of Bauer’s use of 1 Clement: “The Interpretation of 1 Clement in Walter Bauer’s *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*.”³⁹ A crucial aspect of Bauer’s thesis is the influence of Rome—the early orthodox “power broker” who forced her way into a dominant position over weaker churches and alternate interpretations of Christianity. It is this argument that Heron examines in considerable detail. He acknowledges that it appears “extremely attractive” due especially to its being clear, direct, and comprehensive. But this attractiveness is itself problematic:

Precisely because the whole interpretation is so plausible, one must immediately wonder whether its virtues of simplicity and comprehensiveness are to be attributed to Bauer’s discovery of the real significance of the events and developments he describes, or whether rather they reflect a desire to impose on the complexity of history an over-simplified pattern. Is the plausibility and attractiveness of the whole theory based upon its coherence with the available evidence, or is it rather based upon the power of Bauer’s synthesizing imagination?⁴⁰

Heron will conclude that the latter is, unfortunately, the case. His first major criticism is that Bauer’s interpretation of 1 Clement is *not* based on 1 Clement. It is based, rather, on evidence drawn from elsewhere and from attempting to read between the lines in 1 Clement, assuming that the letter itself is in part designed to hide Rome’s true message and motive (526). “He has explained—indeed, explained away—all those elements

³⁹ A. I. C. Heron, “The Interpretation of 1 Clement in Walter Bauer’s *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 55 (1973): 517–45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 525.

in I Clement which might seem to weigh against his interpretation, which he opposes to the meaning which Clement prefers to suggest" (i.e., what a plain reading the text of 1 Clement itself would seem to say).

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

Heron concludes that

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

... The theory as a whole indeed depends more on his powers of imagination than on the facts available to us.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid., 536, 537.

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

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

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

his basic error is in reading history backwards, either by demanding that the fullest or even “ideal” stage of a development must be present at its beginning in order for it to exist, or by imposing later events on earlier ones to support his interpretations. Frankly, he misreads the texts. One should be cautious in following his lead in places where there are few texts and much silence, when it can be demonstrated that he does not proceed on good grounds with the existent texts.⁴²

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

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

⁴² Frederick W. Norris, “Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered,” in *Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Schism in Early Christianity*, ed. E. Ferguson, Studies in Early Christianity 4 (New York: Garland, 1993), 257; originally published in *VC* 30 (1976): 23–44 (quotation above from p. 43).

Egypt.⁴³ His purpose is not primarily a critique of Bauer; that is a secondary outcome in the second half of the book. In contrast to Bauer's query as to where the evidence is for orthodoxy in the second century, Roberts asks why there is no trace of *either* orthodoxy *or* heresy; there are hardly any traces of Christianity in any form. But there is some and Roberts proceeds to sort through the available evidence, beginning with the papyri and evidence within various documents (such as *nomina sacra*). His conclusion is that the silence has little to do with the prevalence of Gnosticism, but rather that Egyptian, and in particular Alexandrian, Christianity originally remained more tightly connected to the Jewish community in Alexandria than it had in other parts of the empire, and apparently on better terms with their non-Christian Jewish neighbors. Few Gentiles apparently became part of the church there, so it retained a strongly Jewish flavor, even after AD 70. Only when the Jewish community in Egypt was nearly exterminated during the Jewish revolt there (AD 115–17) does Christianity begin to evidence itself distinctly.

We may surmise that for much of the second century it was a church with no strong central authority and little organization; one of the directions in which it developed was certainly Gnosticism, but a Gnosticism not initially separated from the rest of the Church. It was the teaching and personality of the two Gnostic leaders, Basilides and Valentinius, that impressed the Christian world outside Egypt and were remembered, but this is not the whole story.... [eventually] the line between Gnostic and Catholic Christianity was more sharply drawn; but in Egypt, as can be seen in Clement and Origen, the process was slow and distinctions sometimes remained blurred.⁴⁴

⁴³ Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Egypt*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1977 (London: Oxford UP for The British Academy, 1979).

⁴⁴ Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief*, 71–72. The description of the church there as de-centralized and less organized can be confirmed and documented in some detail from Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 18–20, who depends

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

Related to Roberts's study of Egyptian Christianity, McCue, in his article "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," debated Bauer's handling of the Valentinian Gnostic data.⁴⁵ He argues that "Bauer is simply wrong" (119) since he overlooks three key points regarding Valentinianism:

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

McCue's subsequent discussion documents these three points from the Valentinians own statements. Points one and two, in particular, validate Yamauchi's claim that "Gnosticism always appears as a parasite.... 'it is always built on earlier, pre-existing religions or on their traditions.'"⁴⁶

on Attila Jakab, *Ecclesia Alexandria*, 2nd ed. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 176–77.

⁴⁵ James F. McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," *VC* 33 (1979): 118–30.

⁴⁶ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 185, citing in part, H. Drijvers, "The Origins of Gnosticism as a Religious and Historical Problem," *NedTT* 22 (1968): 331.

Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined* (1988)

By far the most detailed analysis of Bauer's work is Robinson's *The Bauer Thesis Examined*.⁴⁷ In this carefully argued work he proposes that "Bauer's understanding of orthodoxy and heresy does not provide the kind of insight into the character of earliest Christianity that is widely attributed to it" (27). In contrast to Bauer's thesis that heresy was early and dominant, Robinson concludes that "it is the catholic community, not the gnostic, that represents the character of the majority in western Asia Minor in the early period" (203). To support this conclusion, he first sketches the history of the debate (chap. 1). Robinson addresses one of the unique features of Bauer's approach: the geographical treatment of the question of heresy in the early church. Bauer's choice to begin with Edessa was deliberate since there he could make his strongest case. Robinson evaluates the evidence available from various areas, concluding that only Asia Minor can form an adequate basis for evaluating the orthodoxy-heresy debate—"no other area is remotely comparable" (41). The criteria for this judgment is the extensive literature, including literature that addresses the question of heresy. On this basis Bauer is faulted for placing the greatest weight on two areas, Edessa and Egypt, that have neither feature—the evidence there is scanty and ambiguous, to say nothing of the fact that neither was a primary center of the early church (42). The other potential areas (Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, and Rome) are not satisfactory either.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 11 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988); originally, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Western Asia Minor in the First Christian Century: A Dialogical Response to Walter Bauer" (PhD diss., McMaster Univ., 1985).

⁴⁸ Edessa, in particular, is problematic in that "our information is too ambiguous or mute to allow us confident reconstructions of Christianity in this area" (58). Egypt, likewise: "the scarcity of the materials from Egypt results in suspicious gaps in the logic of these various reconstructions" (64). Corinth may sound more promising, but beyond

Robinson then turns to the one area which provides the primary data unavailable elsewhere—Asia Minor. After examining the importance and character of Ephesus and western Asia Minor (chap. 3), he turns to a detailed evaluation of Bauer (chap. 4 and 5). “Bauer’s detective work—never dull, sometimes ingenious, occasionally brilliant—suffers from defects more serious than the sporadic overstatements and tendentious claims Far more fundamental and less easily corrigible, the defects of Bauer’s argument are structural” (129). These structural defects include “(1) the hypothetical alliance of ‘ecclesiastically oriented’ Paulinists with Palestinian immigrants against Gnostifying Paulinists; (2) the alleged strength of heresy in the area; and (3) the proposed cause for the rise of the monarchical episcopate” (129–30). The final verdict is that

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

1 and 2 Corinthians, we have only one document for late first and early second century: 1 Clement, which is “a less detailed and considerably more ambiguous momentary glimpse of that church from a person who seems not to have had first-hand acquaintance with the church there. That makes for inventive, untestable, and not necessarily accurate hypotheses” (77). Rome is unfruitful since we have too little information to determine the original form of Christianity there (81), and the literary evidence is meager as it relates to Rome itself and none of it addresses the question of heresy (81–84). We have no literary evidence for either Jerusalem or Antioch in the relevant period (84–87, 88–91).

But the setting aside of Bauer's reconstruction of the early church in western Asia Minor points to something more seriously flawed about the Bauer Thesis. The failure of the Bauer Thesis in western Asia Minor is not merely one flaw in an otherwise coherent reconstruction. The failure of the thesis in the only area where it can be adequately tested casts suspicion on the other areas of Bauer's investigation. Extreme caution should be exercised in granting to the Bauer Thesis insight into those areas for which inventive theses appear credible only because evidence is either too scarce or too mute to put anything to the test. (204)

Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond" (1991)

A helpful, synthetic response to Bauer's work is Michel Desjardins's article, "Bauer and Beyond."⁴⁹ Much of the article consists of digesting and evaluating the work of others, but in so doing he synthesizes these other studies in a helpful way. He approves Robinson's arguments "on the whole" as being "well-taken and well-argued," concluding that Robinson has added "another row of nails to the coffin enclosing Bauer's thesis."⁵⁰ Desjardins's primary contribution relates to the meaning of *αἵρεσις*. He suggests that Bauer has asked the wrong question. Instead of asking whether orthodoxy or heresy came first (Bauer's question), one should ask "what *αἵρεσις* actually meant for first and second-century writers."⁵¹ He seems to endorse Cohen's suggestion that heresy was not a category invented by early orthodoxy as Bauer assumes, but arises from the church's OT heritage, reflecting similar categories as the rabbis. The "common use of scripture and belief in one God possibly led [the Jewish rabbis and the early church] independently to notions of unity, oneness, and exclusivity."⁵² This has obvious implications in support of a more traditional view in which orthodoxy is original and heresy later and derivative.

⁴⁹ Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond," 65–82.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 72; see also 78.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 77.

**Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity*
in *Roman and Coptic Egypt* (2004)**

Although not formally a critique of Bauer's work, Pearson's study examines in considerable detail one of the key geographical areas on which Bauer's thesis is founded. I do not accept some of Pearson's dates or interpretations, but he has provided a very helpful survey of the documentary evidence for Christianity in second- and third- century Egypt. He clearly demonstrates that there was diversity present, yet he rejects Bauer's explanation that heresy was original and dominant. He cites in particular *The Preaching of Peter*, an early second century pseudepigraphal writing that reflects traditional, "orthodox" Christianity. Since this is the earliest such documentary evidence available, it carries considerable weight in the discussion. Pearson comments that "Bauer ignores this important work, which would have been detrimental to his theory."⁵³

Davidson, *The Birth of the Church* (2004)

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

Above all, however, Bauer's theory overlooks the degree to which there clearly was from the beginning a certain set of convictions about Jesus that bound a majority of believers together, and it underestimates the intrinsic impetus that existed within these con-

⁵³ Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity*, 16 n. 18. This work is described as lying "on a trajectory leading to the mainline Christianity of Clement" (16; see also 44).

victions to work out the logical parameters within which the gospel and its advocates could be said to exist. The process of discerning truth and falsehood that evolved in the late first and second centuries was implicitly grounded in the attempts by the first followers of Jesus to think through the consequences of their newfound faith with regard to personal salvation and practical living.⁵⁴

Trebilco, “Ignatius and Others as Witnesses against Bauer” (2006)

One of the plenary addresses at the 2005 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society directly addressed a key portion of Bauer’s arguments.⁵⁵ Trebilco makes four points regarding Bauer’s use of the Ignatian evidence with regard to Asia Minor. (1) The evidence shows that the earliest form of Christianity in western Asia Minor was orthodox and that the heresies that Ignatius opposed were later, derivative forms, especially in regard to Docetism. (2) Bauer’s inference (based on Ignatius and John’s *not* writing a letter to them) that Colossae and Hieropolis were heretical churches is ill-founded; several other explanations are much more probable than Bauer’s argument from silence. (3) Bauer’s contention that disagreement with the bishop was evidence of theological differences (i.e., heresy) is overstated; many of the differences that Ignatius discusses were organizational and structural. And (4) contrary to Bauer’s conclusion that any Pauline memory or influence has been completely lost in Ephesus (because the church there had been heretical for so long), there is evidence of Pauline influence in western Asia Minor at the time of Ignatius.

Trebilco has some specific comments regarding the existence of “orthodoxy” in the geographical area covered by his study.

⁵⁴ 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), 158.

⁵⁵ 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.

So in the literature from Western Asia Minor we find a strong sense of applying criteria by which to judge whether, in the opinion of the author and his community, a certain belief or practice is in keeping with the tradition. This trend is consonant with the sense of “the tradition,” “sound teaching,” or “the truth” that we find in these documents. (42)

Thus the roots of later “orthodoxy” are to be found here. “Orthodoxy” is not to be seen as a later victory by those in power, or something determined by politics. It goes back to and is an organic development from the much earlier period.... [There is] a strong sense of doctrinal self-consciousness on the part of the canonical authors.... This sense of a limit, self-consciously adopted, is a very significant feature of Western Asia Minor. (43)

The conclusion of this article is that “Bauer’s thesis does not stand up to scrutiny with regard to the situation in Western Asia Minor. Where we can investigate the matter, what Bauer calls ‘heresy’ is neither the earliest form of Christian faith, nor is it in the majority” (43).

Summary of Responses

Following his own survey of previous studies, Harrington concludes that “Bauer’s reconstruction of how orthodoxy triumphed remains questionable.”⁵⁶ It would seem that a stronger statement is justified. Hurtado’s judgment is correct:

Over the years ... important studies have rather consistently found Bauer’s thesis seriously incorrect.... In fact, about all that remains unrefuted of Bauer’s argument is the observation, and a rather banal one at that, that earliest Christianity was characterized by diversity, including serious differences of belief. Those who laud Bauer’s book, however, obviously prefer to proceed as if much more of his thesis is sustainable. Unfortunately, for this prefe-

⁵⁶ Daniel J. Harrington, “The Reception of Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy*,” *HTR* 73 (1980): 297–98.

rence, Bauer's claims have not stood well the test of time and critical examination.⁵⁷

Or as Bock asks, "If the two central Bauerian positions are flawed [diverse origins and Roman influence], why does the overall thesis stand?"⁵⁸ We might rather conclude with Altendorf that Bauer has posed a "konstruktive Phantasie" or an "elegant ausgearbeitete Fiktion."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 520–21.

⁵⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind the Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 47.

⁵⁹ "A constructive fantasy of the author" and "an elegantly worked-out fiction" (Hans-Dietrich Altendorf, "Zum Stichwort: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*," *ZKG* 80 [1969]: 64, cited by Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 50). (Altendorf's article has not been accessible to me; according to Bock, the first description relates to Bauer's arguments from silence, the second refers to his view of the Roman church's relation to Corinth in 1 Clement.)