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Introduction

James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu

What is the second century? Should we, as with other 'centuries', talk about it in terms of a long second century,[1] ascribing to it a period of time which goes beyond its strict mathematical limits? And how will any particular perspective on the century affect the way its length is calculated? A 'Christian' second century, for instance, may be temporally different from a 'Jewish' or 'pagan' second century.[2] Whatever we think of this matter, a Christian second century has been a perennial subject of interest among scholars, in particular because of its perceived transitional character which, for many, renders it a *Schlüsselepoche*.[3] Conventionally, it has been presented as a time of consolidation,[4] seen in increased institutionalization, often in the face of crises, during which the ideas of orthodoxy and heresy were honed and the inchoate authority structures of Christianity established; hence the transition is from the rather looser conception of the Christian faith witnessed in the New Testament to the more systematic articulations of belief and practice, as well as of networked structures of authority, that emerged from the third century. Yet even this looks different if the emphasis is looking forward from the first (New Testament)

[1] One might think in this context of discussions of the 'long' nineteenth century, which some propose runs from 1789 to 1914.

[2] Some would date the Jewish second century from the fall of Jerusalem in 70 to the publication of the Mishnah at the beginning of the third century (see Alexander in this volume). On the other hand, one might want to date the 'pagan' second century from 70 to 192 CE, that is, from the period of the Flavians to the Antonines, as is the case with the *Cambridge Ancient History* vol. xii. A Christian second century might run from the traditional date ascribed to *1 Clement* (96 CE) to the death of Clement of Alexandria in the early 200s. Other time frames could be suggested for each different context.

[3] Löhr 2002a, 248: 'Für die Rekonstruktion der Geschichte des antiken Christentums spielt das zweite Jahrhundert immer noch die prekäre Rolle einer *Schlüsselepoche*.'

See Ferguson 1981, 4, for further discussion of the century's transitional character, not least between disciplines, which, he opined, in part accounted for what he took at the time to be the neglected state of its study.

[4] See Tröger 1988, 131, who talks about the century as marked by a 'Konsolidierungsprozess'.

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century to the second, or if it is looking back from the more obviously ecclesial third century to the inchoate second.

But over the past thirty or so years, while the belief that the century is an important one has not diminished, there has been a growing awareness that this older characterization should be revised and a more complex account of this period be undertaken. This is partly due to an emerging consensus that Christianity in this period was stubbornly diverse, a view with its roots in Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* of 1934, whose real effect only came to be seen in the early 1970s and beyond.[5] Accompanying this conviction, but also emerging from textual discoveries and the application of new theoretical insights, is the view that many of the old categories, which had become central in descriptions of the Christian second century, categories adopted from some of the second century's principal Christian writers, such as Justin and Irenaeus, needed to be revised. Terms like 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy', 'Gnosticism' and even 'Christianity' and 'Judaism' were no longer self-evident. Such terms, on this account, are constructs,[6] the expressions of dangerously reified entities, which mask more complicated realities, among Christians (and Jews) in general, where identities were evolving and fluid, and where distinctions between groups, whether those traditionally termed heretical and orthodox, or Jew and Christian, were less clear. In such a view all texts, not least those written by individuals who later came to be associated with the orthodox, are read not as defences of a generally recognized 'deposit of faith', but as attempts, in the midst of a great and interconnected diversity, to construct one. Against such a background, made more complex by the long acknowledged lack of sources available for this period (only a fraction of the number to which Eusebius refers in his *Ecclesiastical History*), attempts to characterize the century in terms of the various components of a developing 'orthodoxy' (a view, which to varying degrees is beholden to an Irenaean/Eusebian view of the period), confronted with intermittent crises, become much more difficult, and the construction of narratives of any kind suspect, with their tendency to teleologies of various kinds. The aim of a second-century history becomes a more comprehensive, nuanced, inclusive account, where the old certitudes of a once apparently familiar map, delineating

[5] Markschies 2007, 339–69, for a discussion of Bauer's work, esp. 356f., where its reception is considered. See also Wilken 1981, 102, who explains why Bauer's work became so influential from the 1970s.

[6] See, for example, Le Boulluec 1985 who uses the term 'notion' with reference to the conceptualization of heresy in the second century. See also Williams 1996 on 'Gnosticism'; Lieu 2004 with reference to much earlier literature.

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a story of continuities, disappear and new accounts become necessary. Such accounts need not reject narrative – indeed many continue to want to tell a story of sorts – but insofar as they embrace that idea, it will be in a more complex form.[7]

Complementary to this shift in emphasis has been a growing sense that Christian developments in the second century should not be seen primarily in isolation from the wider cultural and religious world out of which they emerged. Rather, reflecting a trend in the study of late antique Christianity pioneered by Peter Brown, such developments should be viewed within the framework of wider changes in the ancient world. Such a shift is precisely that – Christianity has always been viewed by those who have specialized in its study as a movement emerging from a particular context and explicable in relation to that context. However, whereas the tendency has been to describe it as primarily new and marked by its 'difference' within the ancient world, the shift towards a more embedded representation allows Christianity to be treated as one among a number of Mediterranean religions.[8]

The current volume seeks to reflect this changed environment through the discussion of a number of issues and themes which are central to it. While the broad subject of the individual chapters was chosen by the convenors of the conference,[9] there was no attempt to impose a particular format upon them or a unifying ideological position. In fact, as will become clear, while all the chapters reflect the shifting landscape of second-century Christian studies, they do so in very different ways, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing, with the broad trends that are outlined earlier and will be discussed in greater detail later, but always feeling the need to engage with them.

It is not the purpose of the chapters to provide either an introduction to the complexities of the new landscape outlined earlier or a comprehensive analysis of them.[10] The subjects treated do, in different ways, reflect key aspects of the changing world of second-century studies, although inevitably they could be extended in many directions; moreover, the adoption of different levels of approach, some more abstract, others more detailed

[7] See n. 27 below and our discussion of Markschies and Löhr.
[8] See Salzman and Sweeney 2013; and Spaeth 2013.
[9] At the original conference, which took place between March 14 and 16 of 2013, individual speakers spoke in pairs about specific subjects, with the freedom to explore the subject as they wished. The resulting network of intersecting insights and concerns led the editors to arrange the volume differently from the conference and to categorize the chapters under different general sections.
[10] A handbook would require more extensive treatment of such topics as the Second Sophistic, of ritual, of the so-called Apocryphal texts and other subjects, too.

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and specific, offers a combination of broader theory and assessment with text-based analysis.

The volume also reflects the shifting environment to which the previous paragraphs have referred through the identity of its contributors. While some of these hail from departments of theology and/or religious studies, others are classicists or scholars of ancient Judaism. While it would be wrong to imply that people from the latter two disciplines have not been participants already for some time in the discussion of the Christian second century, they are more so now than was once the case, a fact which reflects, in part at least, a growing sense that ancient Christianity can illuminate the development of ancient Judaism and of the pagan world out of which it emerged as well as the study of those subjects illuminating it. It is hoped that, together, the variety of subject and of approach, inevitably selective, will provoke further conversations between participants from different backgrounds and contribute towards re-envisaging this period.

In what follows we attempt to locate the chapters within the framework of some of the formative debates, both of subject and method, within the study of second-century Christianity, and invite readers to join in the conversation that ensues.

1 Methods of Study

It cannot yet be said that the second century has become the conscious focus of methodological experimentation to the extent that has been the case with the New (and Old) Testament. In the latter, the primacy of the so-called historical-critical method, with its attention fixed on questions of sources, dating, authorial intention and readerly context, has been effectively challenged, particularly by approaches which either prioritize the ideological agenda introduced by the investigator, or immerse themselves in the literary strategies of the narrative, and in the play between the reader and a text, which is the sole reliable producer of its 'world'. Many students of the second century are still more concerned in general to uncover 'what happened', and are largely confident of being able to do so, even while acknowledging, at least in the case of both the Jews and the Christians of the Graeco-Roman world, that the exercise is constrained, if not distorted, by the fact that the surviving evidence represents a small fraction of what was produced at the time. Yet even in this endeavour the focus of attention has perhaps shifted. As in other history-writing, it is no longer assumed that the story is to be told through the 'great, the good and their dastardly opponents', that is through the church men [*sic*], their hierarchies and

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institutions, and their triumphant battles over the forces of opposition, whether external 'paganism' or internal 'heresy'. There may be only limited interest in describing the 'everyday life of the early Christians', which was probably not so different from the everyday life of their neighbours, but that latter fact itself becomes a point of interest rather than of disdain. Moreover, the varying perceptions and practices of those who did not leave literary texts are no longer treated as of secondary interest or status; hence, as shall be seen, 'archaeology' and the study of material culture are now recognized as offering an alternative window into the past, capturing such experiences, in contrast to the older picture of 'biblical archaeology' as being in the service of demonstrating the truth and antiquity of the texts.[11] This is taken up by Laura Nasrallah's chapter, which enables a dialogue between the material evidence for dice oracles and literary texts in order to offer a new perspective on Christian participation in fundamental human experiences and the philosophical questions they provoked.

This example reflects the broader concern to hear alternative voices to those that speak through the texts which previous accounts have traditionally treated as the authoritative record of the past. That concern coincides with other related ones, and with similar ones elsewhere in the humanities. The pervasive current emphasis on the diversity of emergent Christianity, as also of the Judaism of the period, reflects this widespread rejection of allegiance to the controlling narrative of the supposed victors.[12] That this is but a subset of the rejection of a single master-narrative, which is characteristic of post-modernity, need only alert us to the fact that previous accounts of the period were no less contextually framed. So, too, the contemporary rejection of established authorities is played out here in the fascination with non-canonical texts of the period, whether long-known or newly discovered, and with the theories of past political manoeuvering that ensured their suppression, both as popularized (*The Da Vinci Code*) and in more scholarly circles (the claims for the priority of Marcion's Gospel).[13]

Perhaps most illustrative of the method would be the now familiar example of listening to the alternative voices of women, a subject not treated in this volume. Here, the study of early Christianity has followed in the wake of that of the New Testament, while also being enriched by what has been happening in scholarship on Late Antiquity. Initial

[11] Nasrallah 2010; for Judaism, see Levine 1998, 2012. For the later period, see MacMullen 2009.
[12] Ehrman 2003.
[13] Vinzent 2014; and Klinghardt 2015.

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strategies merely named the women, either whose presence in the texts had long been ignored (e.g. Junia in Romans 16.7) or who were to be found in writings that had been marginalized in the political processes of the following centuries, and gave them their place in the history, often in conscious challenge to subsequent histories and vested interests that denied them a continuing role. Subsequently, greater awareness of the text itself, and of the rhetorical strategies embedded in all writing and even the apparently 'purely informational' or 'documentary', has challenged an optimistic historicism.[14] More recently, attention has turned from 'women' to 'gender', a category from which none can escape, but which nonetheless is recognized as a cultural construct; hence the interest has been on how the constructions of gender characteristic of the Graeco-Roman and Jewish worlds can be seen to play out within Christian texts, and how, if at all, the latter subvert these. The intersection between cultural studies and the study of Late Antiquity, particularly in North America, has been especially creative, with reference mostly to the fourth century although with an impact also on the second.[15] Yet an emphasis on 'construction', the so-called literary turn, may successfully undermine any attempt to parrot the received master-narrative, but may also exclude the retrieval of any alternative narrative after all available.[16]

The same dilemmas of 'construction' also plague the recent interest in identity and its formation.[17] Past confident histories of Christianity and its neighbours in the second century inevitably assumed a stability and unanimity regarding the subject of the story. Contemporary critiques of the essentialism that has accompanied modern discourses of race, ethnicity or nationhood have joined forces with sensitivity to the rhetoric of the literary texts (as also of material culture) as being no less engaged in the persuasive construction of a reality. The reverse side of the coin of the recognition of the diversity of early Christianity(ies) has been the recognition also of the strategies by which the literary texts project an uncontroverted account of what it is to be 'a Christian', even if that is not a term all prioritize. Students of the classical world have examined how, out of a disparate set of peoples, histories and experiences, a sense of 'being Greek' was shaped, regardless of whether all signed up to it; the same was

[14] Lieu 2004.
[15] Burrus 2000, 70–7; and Castelli 2004. The influence of Michel Foucault (1976) has been paramount.
[16] Cameron 1989; and Clark 1998a.
[17] For the intersection of these concerns, see Nasrallah and Schüssler-Fiorenza 2009.

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true of 'Roman-ness'.[18] How far did the construction of a 'Christian' identity follow the same lines? Some, echoing their early forbears, would emphasize that Christian texts play little attention to such defining 'ethnic' characteristics as language, territory or descent. Erich Gruen and Oskar Skarsaune are largely agreed in what follows that the formula 'a third race [*genos*]', found in a few early texts, does not point to any 'ethnic' characterization of the early Christians within the second century, either by outsiders or by themselves. Both highlight the primary concern of the texts cited as one of negotiating the relationship between the new movement and the Jewish matrix and heritage of its birth. More implicitly, both are engaged in a refutation of those interpreters who, with more emphasis on the constructed character of all such attempts at self-definition, whether or not dubbed 'ethnic' or 'racial', would contend that the strategies deployed by early Christian writers are in practice of a very similar order to those of their 'Greek' or 'Roman' peers, as also to those of the theoretical modelling of identities.[19] However, such methodological concentration on the nature of literary rhetorical strategies and on the instability of construction may lead some to question whether any study of 'early Christianity', and so of its fellow journeyers, is able to identify the object of its endeavours.

2 Narrative or No Narrative

Can a story of second-century Christianity be told? Is such an undertaking desirable? These questions can be raised on a number of accounts. First, the issue of Christian diversity, however understood, problematizes privileging particular versions of Christian truth over others, and so telling a particular story, which necessarily excludes and so, by extension, misrepresents. Related to this is the issue of teleologies – that is, the difficulty of telling a story without assuming a particular result, or put another way, the linear character of stories always assumes an endpoint, which, again in an exclusionary way, dictates the way the story is told. Third, does the rise of theoretical considerations, discussed before, make the telling of a story seem passé, perhaps impossible, even if in the end it may be difficult to avoid?

Those who have been strong advocates of diversity have not always abandoned narrative. Bauer had a story to tell, which assumed the temporal precedence in many parts of the empire of what came to be called

[18] Miles 1999.
[19] Buell 2005.

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heresy, and then proceeded to show how Roman orthodoxy won the day. Those who sought to revive what they took to be Bauer's correct instincts and wished to see Christian history in terms of the development of different trajectories also had stories to tell, even if they were stories of diverse developments.[20] Those who have been keen to take seriously Bauer's geographical emphasis have told stories of a local kind.[21] And even a writer such as Ehrman, who has sought to popularize a particular vision of Christianity's diversity at the beginning of its history, suspending all judgements on issues of truth, has still wanted to tell a story in which a so-called proto-orthodox Christianity wins the day over its rivals. Such a story is not told approvingly – it is a study of how a particular battle was won and the means by which the victory was achieved.

It might be, and indeed has been, objected that a view such as that of Ehrman, albeit in a different guise and with different emphases, is a continuation of older stories of decline, in which the Christian second century plays an important role, in this instance from diversity to an imposed unity.[22] It typifies a certain kind of narrative, dubbed by some the horse race model,[23] which anticipates from the start the victory of the proto-orthodox horse, and tells a story from that perspective, however much the attempt is made to overcome the risk of losing sight of diversity and to recognize the 'constructed' character of the orthodox victory. Moreover, such a model, like nearly all the diversity models mentioned earlier, assumes the discreet and bounded nature of different Christian groups, who were somehow able to compete with each other. An alternative perspective would draw on the methodological assumptions discussed earlier, namely by pointing to the fluid, ever-changing and constructed character of identity, and drawing attention to the complex interactions between different representatives of Christianity, rather than to the core stabilities of mooted groups, apparently in competition with each other. Here, texts written by, for instance, the so-called proto-orthodox are less reflections of a reality than rhetorical attempts to create an ideal; the phenomenon of early Christianity ceases to become a battle of groups but a complex interaction between texts which converge at surprising points. Examples of such approaches are visible in Karen King's contribution here, as also in her recent book on the *Secret Gospel*

[20] Koester and Robinson 1971, with recent critique by Kaufman 2011, 120–4.
[21] Edwards 2005.
[22] Ehrman 2003.
[23] Much of this paragraph is indebted to Brakke 2010.

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according to John where the text is not seen as a representative of Gnosticism but on its own terms as a text which draws together different traditions from within Christianity.[24] A similar set of debates has been characteristic of discussions of Jewish-Christian relations, too, where, as shall be seen, narratives based around the apparently neat idea of the parting of the ways have come under critical scrutiny and different accounts proposed, which suggest muddier and more complex identities.

Such an approach, with its implicit opposition to narrative, is at one end of the spectrum of approaches to the Christian second century, and it would be wrong to suggest that there is now a mass of scholars who have given up entirely on some kind of narrative account of the period.[25] Yet, many of its assumptions can be seen in what might be termed more standard works on early Christianity; thus, people have become increasingly sceptical about the use of such terms as Jewish-Christian or Gnostic, or of genealogical approaches to Christian groups; they have become more keenly aware of the hybrid character of early Christianity, so that those once dubbed heretical come not only to be seen as part of any account of early Christian history, but also as individuals sharing much in common with those subsequently dubbed 'orthodox' and indeed contributing to the articulation of their views.[26] As in wider historical scholarship, terms like 'teleology' and 'grand narrative' have come to be viewed with suspicion.[27] While such accounts do not reduce themselves solely to the fine-grained study of texts, or relinquish any notion of a kind of Christian continuity, narratives are balanced with alternative models, as in that of a laboratory discussed later, or are offered in a more nuanced form.

Elements of this debate about narrative, and the related issues of continuity and discontinuity, identity and history, are reflected in this volume, albeit in contrasting ways. At the front end of the period, James Carleton Paget questions the distinction often drawn between the New

[24] See King 2006.

[25] See, for instance, Mitchell and Young 2006, xiii. 'We have endeavoured to capture the complexity of early Christianity and its socio-cultural setting, whilst also indicating some of the elements that make it possible to trace a certain coherence, a recognizable identity, maintained over time and defended resolutely despite cultural pressure that could have produced something else.'

[26] A thesis most recently exemplified in Judith Lieu's work on Marcion (Lieu 2015), where the aim is to play down the construct of Marcion as a heretic and focus on seeing him alongside his contemporaries, both Christian and pagan.

[27] See Löhr 2002a, 248 and esp. 261: 'Es kann heute nicht mehr darum gehen, eine legitimatorischen Interessen dienende Grosserzählung des antiken Christentums im 2. Jh. vorzulegen oder zu bestätigen . . . '; Markschies 2007, 381, who in a discussion of a crisis-based view of the second century, speaks of it as 'mit einer unbrauchbaren Teleologie verbunden'.

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Testament and the second century, emphasizing the extent to which the New Testament is a product of the second century, acknowledging the difficulties such an observation produces for a continuing narrative that straightforwardly links the second century with what precedes it. While he draws critical attention to some of the prevailing narratives from the last two centuries of study, which join the New Testament and the second century, both ones of decline and more positivistic ones, he tentatively argues against a dissolution of the categories, New Testament and second century. Karen King, reflecting an ongoing theme in her work to which reference has already been made, refuses to talk at all about continuities or genealogies, as she puts it. Writing against the background of the breakdown, and now of the accepted fall, of the old certainties that sprang from the idea of 'Gnosticism', as she presents it, she argues for a complex remapping of early Christianity, which even encompasses the convergence of texts conventionally thought to emanate from disparate bounded groups. 'Greater complexity can illuminate better how the development of Christianity was more dynamic and multifaceted than well-bounded categories or the positing of uniform and unified groups fractured from each other would suggest.' Mark Edwards' chapter joins King in denying the existence of an entity called Gnosticism; while he does not straightforwardly address the question of a narrative of early Christianity, his chapter traces other continuities between the so-called proto-orthodox and the Gnostics, suggesting that our sense of the difference between these two groups may arise from a misreading of the latter's work. Lewis Ayres, on the other hand, while accepting the fact of diversity, or at least the influence it has had as a concept in recent discussion, wants, nevertheless, to retain a narrative of sorts understood in terms of an emphasis on fundamental continuities between the discursive space of the earliest Christian documents and that of what he reluctantly terms the 'proto-orthodox' in the period between 60 and 220 CE. This discursive space can best be understood in terms of shared narrative patterns, reproduced in broad terms by a range of writers in this period, and nurtured by complex networks of communities, initially through letters but then, in the third century, through meetings. Appealing to the kind of continuities argued for in Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances, Ayres seeks to advocate a moderate form of Christian continuity,[28] which distinguishes between a kind of broad centre, and ideas and groups outside of that (broadly corresponding to

[28] For a similarly nuanced view, see Wilken 1981.

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