Assembling Early Christianity

In this book, Cavan Concannon explores the growth and development of Christianity in the second century. He focuses on Dionysios of Corinth, an early Christian bishop who worked to build a network of churches along trade routes in the eastern Mediterranean. Using archaeological evidence and analyzing Dionysios' fragmentary letter collection, Concannon shows how various networks and collectives assembled together and how various Christianities emerged and coexisted as a result of tenuous and shifting networks. Dionysios' story also overlaps with key early Christian debates, notably issues of celibacy, marriage, readmission of sinners, Roman persecution, and the economic and political interdependence of churches, which are also explored in this study. Concannon's volume thus offers new insights into a fluid, emergent Christianity at a pivotal moment of its evolution.

Cavan W. Concannon is Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *"When You Were Gentiles": Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence* (2014).

Assembling Early Christianity

Trade, Networks, and the Letters of Dionysios of Corinth

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To Patt Concannon
with all my love and to the memory
of Helmut Koester

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Preface

This project began in the spring of 2009. At the time I was a fellow at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA). One evening, while working away on what was undoubtedly an erudite footnote for a book on Paul, it occurred to me that I did not really know anything about what happened to the collective of Jesus followers in Corinth after the letter known as 1 Clement. A quick library search introduced me to Dionysios of Corinth for the first time. It would take a few more months before I found myself at the dig house for the American School's Corinth Excavations with a little extra time after a long day of excavating. With a glass of Nemean red in my hand, I found a tattered Loeb edition of Eusebius and sat down with a view of the Corinthian Gulf to read about Dionysios and his letter collection. Almost immediately I was struck by what I found, recognizing right away that there was something important here in the pages of Eusebius, something that Eusebius did not even quite seem to know that he had in his library at Caesarea. Here was a letter corpus from the second century that bore witness to a network bigger in geographic terms than that of Paul of Tarsus or Ignatius of Antioch, messy clashes over the kinds of issues that roiled through other Christian texts of the period, and a complicated financial exchange, like Paul's collection for Jerusalem, between Corinth and Rome. The almost utter obscurity of Dionysios and his network in the study of early Christianity was shocking to me. As I dug deeper, I noticed that even Eusebius lacked information about Dionysios, suggesting that within only a century this large network had not only fallen apart but had been largely forgotten outside of a dusty tome that sat on Eusebius' shelf.

It was the dissolution of this network that explains why it was forgotten by early Christians and modern scholars alike, but the existence of a failed network of early Christian collectives is also something to dwell on. Scholarship on Christian origins, both ancient and modern, has long been caught in the discourse of Christianity's surprising success, its conquest of the Roman Empire, its spread throughout the Mediterranean, and its defeat of other forms of religious practice. This discourse is accustomed to some forms of Christianity that did not make it because they "lost" to the growing forces of "orthodoxy," be they Gnostics, Marcionites, Montanists, or any of the other boogeymen conjured by the early heresiologists. But in Dionysios we find a figure who Eusebius claims was orthodox, who fought with other "orthodox" bishops, and who ultimately failed to create a lasting network of collectives. In Dionysios the narratives of orthodox unity and success and of heretical failure begin to fall apart. Sitting among the remains of Dionysios' hometown it became clear to me that Dionysios was deserving of the same scholarly treatment that has attended other second-century Christian authors, not just because of the scope of his influence but also because early Christian historiography needs to be reminded that the "spread" of Christianity around the Mediterranean was far from a linear phenomenon or the advance of a conquering army of pious martyrs. Moving like the tangled, knotted, and confusing root system of a bamboo shoot, the cultural flow that was early Christianity made its way across the Mediterranean along strikingly rhizomatic avenues. Neither a conquering army nor a field of runners racing for the finish line of imperial dominance, early Christianities came together and fell apart, only to build and rebuild again.

While this project began at the ASCSA and its Corinth Excavations, this book is the result of the support of a number of institutions and colleagues. I was able to lay the groundwork for much of what appears in the book while holding a post-doctoral fellowship in Early Christianity in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University. There I benefited from a number of colleagues who responded to several early drafts of what became chapters in this volume: Brent Nongbri, Edwin Judge, Malcolm Choat, Lea Beness, Chris Forbes, Tom Hillard, Mary Jane Cuyler, Rachel Yuen-Collingridge, Sean Durbin, James Unwin, Brad Bitner, and Jack Tsonis. In particular, I would like to thank Larry Welborn and Alanna Nobbs for their support and encouragement. This book was begun at Macquarie but began to come together at Duke University where I was an ACLS New Faculty Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor in the Departments of Religious Studies and

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Finally, this book is dedicated to my mother Patt Concannon and to Helmut Koester. My mother has been a constant support in the long and winding road that has taken me to and from the Mediterranean so many times. I am constantly amazed by her unending love and strength, her ability to endure, thrive, and give through good times and bad. It is hard to imagine a stronger role model for myself and for my daughters. I am forever grateful to her.

It was Helmut Koester who first led me out into the lands that have featured so centrally in this project and who taught me how to think about the archaeology of the ancient world alongside the study of early Christianity. It is hard to overestimate the impact that Helmut made on the study of early Christianity and harder still to measure the impact that he made on my own life and work. I will always treasure our time together, whether it was over martinis at Chang Sho or retsina under the shade in a Greek village. Though he did not live to see this book completed, he lives in its pages and in the hearts of those of us who had the privilege to study, travel, and drink alongside him.