

Introduction

“Diamonds in a Dunghill”: Seeking New Approaches in Early Christian Studies

When Thomas Jefferson took up a razor to piece together his *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, his goal was to strip away, quite literally, the vestiges of ancient philosophy and so-called gnosticism that had convoluted the work of the “simple evangelists.” In a letter to John Adams, he boasted that the “primitive simplicity” of early Christianity was as plain as “diamonds in a dunghill.” Strategically pasting together passages from the canonical gospels, he imagined himself liberating the text from the “logos and demiurges, aeons and daemons” of Christian Platonists. This “Jefferson Bible” intended to lay bare the pure teachings of a remarkable, ancient moralist.¹ While Jefferson’s assembled text illustrates the extent to which scripture is “good to think with,” as Claude Lévi-Strauss once said, it also stands as evidence for how scripture, in a sense, changes over time.²

Jonathan Z. Smith charged, somewhat ironically, that the historical-critical study of the Bible suffers from an antiquarian bias. This bias is exemplified by the tendency of scholars to begin their evaluations of ancient materials from the point of a text’s prehistory “but never its

¹ Cited from Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 159. On the influence of Jefferson’s works and letters on the study of Christianity, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” in *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1–35. Also see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 287.

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 2 (1971): 131–40.

subsequent history.”³ Our earliest writings about Jesus are not only artifacts of the ancient Mediterranean but also artifacts of second-eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century thought.⁴ Others such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith have made similar claims noting that scholars of Christian origins should approach their source material “not merely as a set of ancient documents or even as a first- and second-century product but as a third-century and twelfth-century and nineteenth-century and contemporary agent.”⁵ The Jefferson Bible is a fine example of the subsequent handling of scripture in the service of gaining insights into Christian history. Such activity need not be literal as with Jefferson and his razor, but it can be evident in the frameworks, terms, and methods used to describe the beginnings of Christianity.

Jefferson’s larger correspondence reveals that his stitchery was a well-intentioned attempt at historiography. Jefferson and his cohort perceived that the gospel writers had injected popular philosophy into their accounts of Jesus’ life in order to make his teachings more palatable to a Roman (i.e., “pagan”) audience.⁶ The notion that the so-called primitive Christians would have been in any way “philosophical” agitated against a strongly held vision of Jesus as a humble moral teacher tailed by his “unlettered apostles.” Chief among these incursions was a breed of Platonism that, in Jefferson’s view, smacked of Trinitarianism. He cautioned that “it is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one and one is three.” Jefferson’s planned “euthanasia for Platonic Christianity” remained fixed on this particular motif.⁷

Hindsight suggests that Jefferson’s terms and methods were greatly influenced by eighteenth-century Deist and anti-Catholic polemics in

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *On Teaching Religion*, ed. Christopher I. Lehrich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30.

⁴ J. Z. Smith raises this same issue in the case of the “J” and “Q” sources in *On Teaching Religion*, 30.

⁵ Smith, “The Study of Religion,” 134; Smith, *On Teaching Religion*, 30. Also see Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” 1–35. I also cite this quote from W. C. Smith in Robyn Faith Walsh, “Q and the ‘Big Bang’ Theory of Christian Origins,” in *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Barry S. Crawford and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 483–533, cit. 483.

⁶ Jefferson’s conversation partners on Christianity include John Adams and Joseph Priestly. See E. P. Smith, *Priestly in America: 1794–1804* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1920), 122–24, 145–46. This source is also cited in Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” 3, n. 2.

⁷ Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” 9; L. J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 1–2, 2:433.

Introduction

3

which he was something of a participant-observer.⁸ Working from an Enlightenment vocabulary, he reinscribed binary categories of orthodoxy and heresy, theology and philosophy, Judaism and Hellenism in his evaluations while simultaneously professing to offer a more accurate representation of the first century C.E.⁹ Related arguments against “pagan imprinting” on the historical Jesus would continue to have enormous influence on subsequent studies of early Christianity and late antiquity.¹⁰ Ultimately, Jefferson’s ambition may have been to reconstruct the sayings of the historical Jesus to his liking, but his efforts revealed more about Jefferson’s own interests than those of his subject – as is often the case.¹¹

The conceit of the Jefferson Bible was that the gospel writers manufactured *lives* about Jesus and his followers reflective of certain aims and sensibilities. For Jefferson, the gospels’ so-called paganism revealed that they were constructed narratives whose purpose lay beyond offering a historically authentic account of the earliest stages of the Jesus movement. The irony of Jefferson’s charge is thick, but he was correct in positing that early Christian literature was not strictly concerned, to paraphrase

⁸ Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” 9; Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:385.

⁹ The false dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism is addressed in more detail by Troels Engberg-Pedersen in his 2001 *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*. In that edited volume, Engberg-Pedersen explains that the ideological implications of each term have served to create artificial distinctions between the people, practices, and language of Judea and the rest of the Greek and Roman world. As I argue in Chapter 2, this interpretation has roots in Romantic thinking about the peoples and places of the ancient Mediterranean (including political and anti-Semitic leanings). Engberg-Pedersen acknowledges influence from the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*; however, he convincingly argues that the territories “conquered and held by Alexander the Great and his successors and then by the Romans” constituted more of a “cultural melting pot” than is usually recognized. As such, we should understand Judaism as one of a number of “traditions with roots before the Hellenistic period proper,” like the traditions of Greece and Rome that experienced significant interface and overlap with one another. Engberg-Pedersen also effectively argues that the Judaism/Hellenism divide maintains traditional, theological readings that render early Christian writings and, particularly, Paul as “pawns in a power game.” This “game” views the representative texts and practices of Christianity not as fully integrated within Mediterranean society but as incomparably unique and “new” within its historical, cultural, and literary context. See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed., *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–4.

¹⁰ Smith, “On the Origin of Origins,” 13.

¹¹ A recent example of personal narrative evidently informing critical theses is Matthew D. C. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), see xiii–xv. Invoking Bakhtin, Larsen conflates modern forms of writing practices and publication (his own) with antiquity.

Plutarch, with writing histories.¹² Jefferson intuited that the gospel writers were, first and foremost, *writers* functioning within a particular medium and employing known and conventional tools of their trade. Their literary choices rendered an idealized vision of Jesus and his life using details more strategic than historical. As Celsus recognized centuries before Jefferson, in reading these works one quickly realizes that their content “may or must be mendacious.”¹³ For various reasons, the gospels were suitable for use as a canonized origin story for the Jesus movement, but by modern standards of veracity, they ultimately reveal little about the beginnings they profess to relate. Rather, the gospels reveal more about the *writers* who created them and the subsequent generations of readers who have endorsed and perpetuated Christianity’s own myth of origins.

THE PARADIGM OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Jefferson’s struggle is emblematic of certain tensions that undergird studies of the New Testament and Christian history: When reconstructing the past on the basis of creative literature like the gospels, how can we meaningfully distinguish between fiction and history?¹⁴ Has the ongoing desire for details – any details – about the reputed origins of this still actively practiced religion led scholars to tread too far into speculation or, in the words of Burton Mack, “fantasy” in their assessments of these texts?¹⁵ In contradistinction to a field like classics – where few of the gods and practices described are still believed – “religious” writings are freighted with a significance that does not attend other kinds of historical

¹² Plut. *Vit. Alex.*, 1.2: “For it is not histories we are writing (ἱστορίας γράφομεν) but lives (βίους). It is not always the most famous deeds which illuminate a man’s virtues and vices (ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας); often a clearer insight into a man’s character is revealed by a small detail, a remark, or a joke (πρᾶγμα βραχὺ... ῥῆμα... παιδιὰ), than by battles where tens of thousands die, or by the greatest of conflicts, or by the siege of cities.” Greek taken from Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch Lives*, VII, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

¹³ Celsus is quoted by Origen, *Contra Celsum*, cit. 2.55; cited in G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁴ The category distinction between fiction and history, both ancient and modern, is discussed in Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, passim, as well as M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and Mediterranean Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1–45.

¹⁵ Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 9.

data; the gospels are read by some as a faithful account of what happened to Jesus and his followers. They are also, in part, responsible for the formation of Western concepts of morality and law. Consequently, vignettes about – and particular understandings of – the teachings of Jesus are broadly familiar to popular audiences, and familiarity can breed critical complacency. Within the secular academy, we have inherited certain methods for reading these “sources” that are specific to our fields and not easily challenged, for both professional and personal reasons. With such high stakes, it is little wonder that the study of religion tends toward reifying tradition.¹⁶ What we ascribe to these texts is so extraordinary; how could we expect them to have been produced in an ordinary way?

This book argues against approaches to the Synoptic gospels that treat them principally as religious texts. Such approaches impede our ability to evaluate these works as we would any other kind of Greco-Roman literature. While these methods are born of our desire for a more concrete understanding of Christian beginnings, they have led us to presume the existence of cohesive religious groups and theological diversity, all the while uncritically invoking the language of “community.”¹⁷ Scholarship that insists on reclaiming the social networks of the gospel writers has been particularly troubled. We know a great deal about Mediterranean and West Asian writers and writing practices, yet analyses of the gospels continue to muddle their social circumstances in order to speak of oral traditions, Christian communities and their literate spokesmen, or the gospels “before authors.”¹⁸ We continually look for evidence of socially marginal, preliterate Christian groups in these works, treating the gospel

¹⁶ I am influenced here by Elizabeth Clark, who says of microhistory/*Alltagsgeschichte*: “the personal quality of its subject matter encouraged a too-easy identity with the people represented and their emotions, obscuring the ‘otherness’ of the past.” Here she is summarizing common critiques of the *Alltagsgeschichte* movement in Germany. This statement also anticipates, to some degree, her later criticism of British Marxist historiography. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), cit. 78–79. A student of Clark’s work may recognize in my hypothetical questioning above her reflections on the state of historiography in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See, in particular, her “The Territory of the Historian,” in *History, Theory, Text*, 63–85.

¹⁷ Stanley K. Stowers, “The Concept of ‘Community’ and the History of Early Christianity,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 238–56; Karen L. King, “Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21st Century,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, nos. 3–4 (2011): 216–37.

¹⁸ Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 3.

writers not as rational actors but as something more akin to Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk*. Few if any disciplines that study the ancient Mediterranean describe their subjects as having such myopic concerns. Why, then, do we treat the gospels so idiosyncratically?¹⁹

While it is the case that writers compose their works with certain audiences in mind, the way scholars of early Christianity have emphasized the *religious* communities of these authors is at the very least parochial, if not ahistorical. Greek and Roman authors routinely describe themselves writing within (and for) literary networks of fellow *writers* – a competitive field of educated peers and associated literate specialists who engaged in discussion, interpretation, and the circulation of their works. These networks could include learned individuals from a variety of social backgrounds, but each member possessed the necessary training and the technical means for producing or publishing various forms of writing. Each was also bound by certain expectations and conventions of training, reading, composition, and literary exchange; while capable of innovation, they were still beholden to the dictates of genre, citation, and allusion in order to demonstrate knowledge of and engagement with other works within their literary field.

It stands to reason that the gospel authors were similarly trained and positioned, working within cadres of fellow, cultural elites.²⁰ Some of their associates may or may not have even had an understanding of being “in Christ”; the act of writing itself was the principle and guiding sphere of influence. In such a historical context, the gospel writers are not the “founding fathers” of a religious tradition – at least not in their historical moment. They are rational agents producing literature about a Judean teacher, son of God, and wonder-worker named Jesus. This particular subject matter offered numerous possibilities for employing literary techniques and motifs in conversation with other writings (and writers) of the milieu – including discourses on gods, Judean practices, philosophy, politics, and paradoxography. In short, the gospels represent the strategic choices of educated Greco-Roman writers working within a circumscribed field of literary production.²¹ It is this social network of literate cultural producers that we should examine in our scholarship, aiming for

¹⁹ On Christian exceptionalism, also see Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), *passim*.

²⁰ As I will explain, cultural elitism does not necessarily correspond to social and economic privilege in Greco-Roman antiquity.

²¹ Here I am invoking the language of Pierre Bourdieu, which features prominently in Chapter 3.

Introduction

7

descriptions that are both practical and plausible given the kinds of social engagement and expertise we know to be typical of such specialists. To be clear, I am not advocating that we exchange one “community” (a gospel community of early Christians) for another (a community of writers); rather, I am offering a critique of how the term “community” has been ascribed to these particular writings historically. Moreover, the social formations of readers and writers that I describe, and for which I offer abundant evidence, are not the idealized communities of the Romantic imagination. I replace a notion of community that lacks effective utility in social analysis, and is supported by little or no historical evidence, with a model widely deployed in historical and sociological scholarship.

Likewise, the rhetorical claims, themes, and narrative structure of the Synoptic gospels are artifacts of certain traditions of imperial-age *literature*, and not evidence of their reliability and “incomparable uniqueness” as religious texts.²² It may no longer be novel to say that the gospels were not *sui generis* literature in the first and second centuries, but this has not stopped the field from largely treating them – and their authors – as if they are exceptional.²³ To illustrate this point, apropos of Jefferson, we know that the gospel writers are heavily influenced by the Middle Platonists, Stoics, and other popular philosophies of the period; yet philosophical terminology and allusion (e.g., *eidōs*, *pneuma*, *logos*, *pistis*) are still often translated with Western Protestant Christian theological vocabulary (e.g., “spirit”).²⁴ We know that attributing authorship to divine forces or authorial anonymity are common rhetorical habits in this period, but when this occurs within the gospels, the tactic is associated with the adaptation of an oral tradition, memory, or “collective authorship.”²⁵ We know Greek and Roman authors routinely offer fanciful paradoxographical or topographical descriptions of their subjects in order to indicate (most often falsely) firsthand knowledge; for the gospels, these references are often taken as literal in some measure (e.g., contact with

²² Stanley K. Stowers, “Kinds of Myths, Meals, and Power: Paul and Corinthians,” in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 105–14, cit. 105.

²³ For more on the history of this tendency in the field, see Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 252–91.

²⁴ See Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 11.

“eyewitnesses” in Luke’s preface).²⁶ Scholars have long noted parallels between the canonical gospels and works like the Greek novel or the *Satyrica*, including the shared *topoi* of ritual anointing, crucifixion, a disappearance off the cross, a cannibalistic fellowship meal, (implied) resurrection, and the motif of the empty tomb; yet comparisons between these ancient *corpora* are few and far between.²⁷

Our narrow approaches are largely a function of the subsequent use of the gospels as documents of Christian origins. Others have described this inclination as the New Testament’s domination by the “internal perspectives of Christian theology” or “academic Christian theological modernism.”²⁸ Because Christianity has exerted such a strong influence on Western politics, philosophy, and ethics, there is a tautological tendency to view the so-called early Christians as being “just like us.” This view was concretized by scholarly practices like *Religionsgeschichte* and the idea that the gospels represent a retrievable and embedded “folk culture” – that the gospels are texts written “by and for the people,” so to speak.²⁹ Whether conscious or habitual, this interpretive anachronism unmoors New Testament writings from their historical context in service of later theological needs. As a result, we perpetuate a still-extant mythology about the rapid institutionalization, diversity, cohesion, and unparalleled origins – the “Big Bang” – of the Jesus movement. We also reach for details on the social world of a community of people – early Christians – not sustained in the text, while functionally ignoring the one social network we can concretely examine from a historical standpoint, that of ancient writers. I discuss these issues of translation and interpretation further in Chapters 1 and 2.

Such readings are reinforced when a work lacks literary refinement, thus inviting associations between it and the interests of nonliterate practices or social formations (e.g., oral tradition and “churches”) or obscure or particularized forms of writing (e.g., *hypomnēmata*). These kinds of associations may well be category mistakes born of modern

²⁶ On the generic conventions of ancient approaches to geography, see, e.g., Richard F. Thomas, *Lands and Peoples in Roman Poetry*, Cambridge Philological Society Supp. Vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1982).

²⁷ Notable exceptions: Ilaria Ramelli, “The Ancient Novel and the New Testament: Possible Contacts,” *Ancient Narrative* 5 (2007): 41–68; Richard I. Pervo, “Wisdom and Power: Petronius’ *Sat.* and the Social World of Early Christianity,” *Anglican Theological Review* 67 (1985): 307–25; Sławomir Poloczek, “Pusty grób Kalliroe i Chrystusa,” *U schyłku starożytności - Studia źródłoznawcze* 13 (2014): 9–32.

²⁸ Stowers, “Kinds of Myths,” 106.

²⁹ Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 269–70.

Introduction

9

assumptions about class and economics that do not correspond with the ancient world. To argue that literacy is directly related to class in antiquity is itself something of an anachronism; high education and knowledge of *paideia* did not necessarily correspond to economic or social standing as we understand these categories today. As demonstrated by the satirical *deipnosophistae* or the *Satyricon's* Trimalchio, participation in dominant literary culture did not guarantee that one possessed the ability to read and write. Likewise, one did not necessarily require wealth, high class, or even free status to be a literate cultural producer, as was the case with Epictetus, a former slave. And certain genres of writing (e.g., *commentarii*) are not firm predictors of the education, relative skill, or elitism of an author.³⁰ Thus, scholars who speculate that the gospels clearly represent collective authorship, memoranda, or the work of less-educated or socially marginal writers are speculating beyond the limits of our evidence. More often than not, these interpretations take the gospels' descriptions of the humble, illiterate masses, rural non-elites, and imperial resisters as representative of the prototypical "early Christian." That the gospel writers might actually represent Roman literary elites writing about supernatural interests and foreign and bucolic landscapes and peoples seems contrary to how we have imagined Jesus' followers for millennia. But this idealized version of the early Christian story confuses the subject matter of the gospels with their authors.

In a similar vein, certain rhetorical approaches deployed in the gospels contribute to the notion that they are somehow exceptional. These writers tell us that Jesus is divinely authorized through his birthright, teachings, and wonder-working as a son of God – a powerful figure, even if a social underdog. He is portrayed in turns as a riddler and purveyor of esoteric knowledge or an ethical teacher and miracle-worker. And, unlike the notable statesmen, poets, and philosophers who populated civic biographies, Jesus' extraordinary wit and otherworldly superpowers reveal his authority and status. In combination, these features communicate that Jesus is an unparalleled figure and suggest that the gospel genre is an innovative departure from previous literary forms. Yet when compared

³⁰ See Richard Last, "The Social Relationships of Gospel Writers: New Insights from Inscriptions Commending Greek Historiographers," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37, no. 3 (2015): 223–52, and Andrew M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 134: "One of the most striking things about the *commentarius*, in contrast to most literary genres of antiquity, is its wide range of authorship. Known writers are spread broadly in time, space, and social status."

with other first-century literature, the Jesus of the gospels can be fruitfully compared with the Cynics, Aesop, the pastoral heroes of the Greek novel, or witty underdogs in the biographical tradition, the subject of Chapter 5. Moreover, many of the *topoi* used by the gospel writers convey Jesus' special standing, but they do so through familiar literary allusions – the empty tomb, for instance, is found throughout Greek and Roman literature and material culture (e.g., the novel and numerous paradoxographical fragments) to indicate supernatural status. Even strategic omissions, like anonymity, are common tricks of the trade among imperial writers and can be understood without associations with memory traditions or communal authorship, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

It is certainly the case that the gospels present strong ideas about certain kinds of social formations – including communities of disciples and *ekklēsia*. If one takes for granted that these groups correspond with the author's social world in some measure, then it is little wonder that the field devotes so much attention to the idea of “Christian communities.” Traditional approaches to the Synoptic gospels are instructive. The explosive growth of early Christianity in Luke is often taken as descriptive, not apologetic. Matthew lacks the same focus on institutionalization and rapid growth, but his sustained interest in group dynamics and an ideal Israel are taken as evidence of his lived aspirations. Mark makes an interesting contribution to this paradigm in that his ornery Jesus is more often misunderstood than revered; his account offers little in terms of communities and rapid institutionalization – this is, after all, the gospel that originally ended with the women fleeing from Jesus' empty tomb, bewildered and afraid, saying “nothing to anyone” (οὐδενὶ οὐδέν εἶπαν; Mark 16:8). Yet discourse about communities and related early Christian social formations routinely get projected back onto Mark (e.g., the Markan “community of the new age”),³¹ thus revealing the idiosyncrasies of

³¹ See Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000). Dwight N. Peterson illustrates this confusion well in the case of the gospel of Mark: “Mark's community has not yielded a controlled field of interpretation. The reason for this is that virtually every scholar who discovers a Markan community behind the gospel – that is, the community for which the gospel was written, and which is supposed to serve as a control for a reading of Mark – discovers a different Markan community. The community behind the Gospel of Mark lived either before 70 [C.E.] or after 70 [C.E.], either in the tense times leading up to the destruction of the temple or in its immediate aftermath. It lived in Rome, or in Galilee, or in Southern Syria. It was a Gentile community, or a mixture of Jews and Gentiles or a Jewish community. Its interests were primarily to establish itself in opposition to a discredited Jerusalem Christianity ... to forge a new, apocalyptic community ... to steer a mediating political