The early Christians were by no means a homogeneous group, let alone a church. This is the fascinating story of the beliefs, practices and experiences of individual Christians of antiquity, their relationships to Jewish tradition and the wider Roman world, and the shockwaves they caused among their contemporaries. Ancient Christians are closely connected to today’s world through a living memory and a common textual heritage – the Bible – even for those who maintain a distance from Christianity. Yet, paradoxically, much about the early Christians is foreign to us and far removed from what passes for this faith as it currently stands. The distinguished historian Hartmut Leppin explores this paradox and considers how such a small, diverse band of followers originating on the edge of the Roman Empire was able within less than three centuries to grow and become its dominant force under Emperor Constantine and his successors.

HARTMUT LEPPIN is Professor of Ancient History at Goethe University, Frankfurt. His research focuses on early Christianity, and he has been awarded Germany’s most prestigious science prize, the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize, as well as the Erwin Stein Prize for interdisciplinary work that is also relevant to the present work. His publications have been translated into six languages.
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From the Beginnings to Constantine

HARTMUT LEPPIN
Goethe University

Translated by Kathrin Luddecke
Contents

List of Figures page vii
Foreword by Jan N. Bremmer x
Acknowledgements xix
List of Abbreviations xxi

Introduction 1

1 Neither Jewish nor Pagan? 25
  1.1 A Tremendous Step: Baptism 25
  1.2 Celebrating Together in New Times 34
  1.3 Jewish Tradition and Christian Appropriation 44
  1.4 Feeding Religious Strife 56
  1.5 The Everyday Nature of Miracles 64
  1.6 Festivals for All Citizens – and Some Christians 71
  1.7 Living among Demons 78
  1.8 Early Christian Burials: Between Family and Church 89
  1.9 ‘We Have No Shrines and Altars’: Building Community 105

2 Christian Authorities 116
  2.1 Speaking in the Name of the Lord: Charisma and Office 116
  2.2 Female Christians and Church Structures 124
  2.3 Late Prophets 136
  2.4 The True Philosophers 149
  2.5 Consensus and Truth: Towards the Episcopate 162
  2.6 Perilous Lustre: The Episcopate 170
  2.7 Church Communities and Money 179
  2.8 The Bodies of the Saints: The Emergence of Relics 187
  2.9 Paradise in the Desert: Self-Denial and Self-Empowerment 195
  2.10 Separate Yet Connected: Early Christian Centres 205
## Contents

3  (Not) of This World: Caring for Self and Others 223
   3.1 New Brothers and Sisters 223
   3.2 Ambivalent Views on Marriage 230
   3.3 Sexual Boundaries 244
   3.4 Christians and Children: Abandonment or Appreciation? 250
   3.5 Equal but Not All That Equal: Slaves 257
   3.6 Spiritual Despair and the Issue of Power: Penance 266
   3.7 A Life of Humility 274
   3.8 Labour in Faith 286
   3.9 Ministry to Those in Need 296

4  Citizens of Two Worlds 305
   4.1 An Imperium without Alternative 305
   4.2 Living in Tribulation 314
   4.3 Controversial Deaths: Martyrs on Trial 323
   4.4 Persecutions: Excuses, Subterfuges and Justifications 316
   4.5 Soldiers in Faith 348
   4.6 Before the Great Advancement: Christians in the Social Elites 357

Looking Back and Ahead 368
Postscript 394
Translations of Primary Sources 399
Notes 407
Bibliography 428
Index of persons and places 460
Figures

1.1 The tomb of Meirus who opposed the winebibbers. From Marc Waelkens, *Die kleinasiatischen Türsteine. Typologische und epigraphische Untersuchungen der kleinasiatischen Grabreliefs mit Scheintür*, Mainz 1986, no. 666, plate 84

1.2 Papyrus Bodmer 14, usually dated to the early third century, is probably one of the first we have from the New Testament. This section shows Lk 14.27 ‘Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’ (second line from the top, right-hand side), with a staurogram visible as part of the word ‘cross’ (Greek *staurós*). Adapted from Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts. Manuscripts and Christian Origins*, Eerdmans 2006, p. 237

1.3 The rain miracle as seen from a non-Christian perspective, portrayed on the column of Marcus Aurelius. Alamy

1.4 Second- or third-century gem showing Jesus on the cross. The inscription reads: *Son, Father, Jesus Christ* (all in the vocative); what follows are in all likelihood magical names. © The Trustees of the British Museum


1.6 This map illustrates the great number of Christian catacombs in Rome; the Callistus (= Calixtus) catacomb lies towards the south. After Fabrizio
viii

List of Figures

Mancinelli, Guide to the Catacombs in Rome, Foligno 2007, p. 2

1.7 The plain yet sophisticated epitaph of Bishop Eutychian in the Calixtus Catacomb. From Margherita Guarducci, Epigraﬁa Greca IV: Epigraﬁe Sacre Pagane e Cristiane, Rome 1978, p. 548, ﬁg. 171

1.8 Floor plan of a Christian edifice in Dura Europos, incorporating an assembly space, in that sense a church, and a baptistery. After Ann Louise Perkins, The Art of Dura-Europos, Oxford 1973, p. 30

1.9 Fresco from the baptistery of Dura Europos showing the women at the empty grave. © Yale University Art Gallery

2.1 Roman representation of the god of healing, Asclepius, wearing the philosopher’s mantle. Alamy

2.2 Seated statue incorrectly restored with modern additions; inscriptions carved in antiquity refer to the circle around Hippolytus. Everett Ferguson Photo Collection: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/ferguson_photos/9446, cc-BY-SA 4.0

2.3 Reconstructed ground plan of the complex surrounding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at the time of Constantine. From Eckart Otto, The Ancient Jerusalem, Munich 2008, p. 111, ﬁg. 32, with kind permission of the author


3.1 Front of the sarcophagus of Marcia. DAI Rome, Inst. Neg. 60.1451, https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/5569524/image/5569524

4.1 Denarius of Tiberius (r.14–37 CE) in whose reign Jesus was active. It features the emperor with a laurel wreath and the inscription TI CAESAR DIVI – AVG
List of Figures ix

4.2 In all probability an anti-Christian caricature showing a crucified ass. The inscription reads: ‘Alexamenus prays to God’ (SEG 47.1512). Alamy 307

4.3 Certificate of pagan sacrifice for Aurelia Bellias (whose name can be made out in the third line) and her daughter Capinis. P.Mich.Inv. 263, recto. University of Michigan, Advanced Papyrological Information System, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1608/263_a.tif, accessed 15 February 2023 317

4.4 Image of the labarum on the back of a coin by Constantine the Great. It shows the Chi-Rho at the top, as well as three circles on the standard itself containing portraits of the emperor and his sons. The lance pierces a snake, representing the Spes publica, ‘shared, public Hope’; the bottom refers to Constantinople where the coin was minted. © The Trustees of the British Museum 339

4.5 Constantine is portrayed as victor on this medallion from Ticinum; the Chi-Rho sign on his helmet is unusual. On the shield is the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus. The circumscription is entirely traditional: IMP[erator] CONSTANTINUS P[ius] F[elix] AUG[ustus], where Pius Felix may be translated as ‘pious and successful’. © The Trustees of the British Museum 355

4.6 Constantine together with the sun god Sol with his radiate crown. The circumscription reads: INVICTUS CONSTANTINUS MAX[imus] AUG[ustus], invictus (‘unconquered’) was a common epithet of Sol. © The Trustees of the British Museum 366
Foreword

Jan N. Bremmer

Early Christianity has long been a poor relation of ancient history. It need not have been so. In the opening volume of his famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in early 1776, Edward Gibbon (1737–94) was the first to subject early Christianity to a narrative analysis that could be called ancient history instead of antiquarianism, the latter basically the study of Greek and Roman antiquities. Even though today the borders between history and antiquarianism are no longer as sharply drawn as in the foundational and often discussed article by Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–87),¹ it remains a fact that with Gibbon we enter a new era in the historiography of the ancient world.

The inclusion of church history in such a large history of the Roman Empire was another innovation. Not that Christianity figured early in his book. Until Gibbon reached the final victory of Constantine in 324 CE, there is no reference to the new religion. His readers will therefore have been very surprised, when turning the page after the mention of the founding of Constantinople, to find two more chapters (15 and 16), detailing the reasons for the rise of Christianity and a discussion of the persecutions. They may also have been surprised by his approach, as Gibbon strongly distinguished himself from the theologians, who might have described ‘Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity’, whereas in his view the historian has the ‘melancholy duty’ to discover ‘the inevitable mixture of error and corruption’ here on earth. With these words Gibbon separated himself from church history as practised until his time and indicated that his would be a secular history.

In his two chapters, Gibbon first listed five causes for the rise of Christianity: (1) its inflexibility; (2) its doctrine of a future life; (3) its alleged miraculous powers; (4) its ‘pure and austere morals’; and (5) its organisation. These points he then used to sketch the nature of emergent Christianity between the early second century and Constantine, more or less the same time frame as in the present book, although in his chapter 16,
he paid more attention to the persecutions, of which he tended to
underplay the severity.

The modern ancient historian soon realises that Gibbon wrote at a time
when epigraphy, papyrology, archaeology and source criticism were still in
statt nascendi and important texts, such as the Gnostic Nag Hammadi
manuscripts, not yet discovered. Nevertheless, the Decline and Fall is still a
delight to read and dazzles by its enormous erudition. Gibbon’s discussion
of his five points and the persecutions laid the basis for all subsequent
historians of early Christianity. We should not overlook, though, that his
views were strongly influenced by the Enlightenment, as is clearly visible
in his ironic and sceptical treatment of Christian beliefs, his negative attitude
towards the Jews or his strong dislike of the zeal of believers, be they Jews,
Christians or even pagans like Julian the Apostate. A modern reader will
also be struck by his essentialising approach. Gibbon regularly speaks of
‘the Christian’ and often distinguishes between the Church and the
‘heretics’, thus following the labelling used by the majority Church.²

It would take a good century before we get again an authoritative study
of early Christianity, albeit of a completely different character. Around
1900, the leading early church historian in Germany, and indeed every-
where else, was Adolf von Harnack (1851–1931), a stupendously learned
scholar. In 1902 he published the first edition of his Mission and Expansion
of Christianity in the First Three Centuries,³ which in the course of twenty
years and four editions expanded from 561 to 1,000 pages. It is no
exaggeration to say that Harnack had read every available source in many
languages and presents all the evidence up to 325 CE that was available at
his time. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this amassing of evidence makes his
book not a joy to read. Still, as a collection of evidence it has not been
surpassed since. It is regularly the case that modern scholars overlook the
fact that Harnack also presented an astonishingly learned survey of the
importance of early Christian charity and the belief in miracles, both of
which were already noted and discussed by Gibbon, whose name Harnack
mentions only three times (669 note 2, 806 note 2 and 946), but also of
the numerosness of the early Christians, the main dates of the missionary
history as well as Christianity’s spread among the upper classes,⁴ the court,
the military and women, even adding the literary evidence for early church
buildings. Instead of a chronological discussion, though, Harnack pre-
sented what he called Längschnitte, ‘longitudinal sections’, of the subjects
he treated in order to make his material more accessible and readable.

Despite this erudition, many modern readers will have ambivalent
feelings about Harnack’s study because of his overly Christian ideas, which
he explicitly stated at the very beginning of his book. One is that the
Christian religion with its Church is the ‘unbounded and therefore per-
fected Jewish religion’ but also its *scharfe Antithese*, ‘sharp antithesis’.
Another is that the Christian religion with its Church is the historical
realisation of God’s revelation, and as such this Church could also resist
the state. That this church could resist the state is certainly true, but many
modern readers will disagree with the other statements, which betray the
liberal Protestant theologian that Harnack was.

Still, throughout his life, Harnack opposed closed ideological and
religious systems, and that explains why he was so interested in the study
of the ancient Church, especially the ‘heretical’ Marcion and his followers.
In his time, Berlin had become one of the most secularised cities of
Europe. Harnack felt that pressure and tried to present Christianity as a
simple religion that would appeal to his individualising contemporaries.
The result of his ideas was a teleological presentation that cannot satisfy the
modern student despite its valuable material. Another striking omission of
his work, which he shares with Gibbon to a certain extent, is the lack of
attention to the Jewish ancestry of Christianity. Admittedly, he notes the
presence of Jews in the ancient world and rightly sees them as important
for the first stage of the Christian mission, but Harnack is not interested in
looking at the Jewish roots of many Christian institutions and customs.
This indifference reflects his own ambivalence towards contemporary and
ancient Judaism and is one of Harnack’s shadow sides. At the same time,
he is also not very interested in the pagan *Umwelt* of early Christianity.
Given that he proudly states in the preface that his book hardly contains
any hypotheses, it is not surprising that his work betrays no influence
either of contemporary sociologists of religion, such as Max Weber
(1864–1920) or Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), although he knew both
of them personally. I stress this point, as Leppin himself, in his Prologue,
notes how much he is indebted to these two scholars, as to Harnack
himself. In the end, Harnack’s book is more a treasure trove of data than
a hive of ideas with inspiration for further research and new questions.

Harnack worked when German Classics was at its peak and he main-
tained close contacts with its greatest scholars, Theodor Mommsen
(1817–1903) and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848–1931). How-
ever, unlike Harnack, they were not only unbelievers but even rather
antagonistic towards Christianity. Their dominance in German
*Altertumswissenschaft* was instrumental in underrepresenting Christianity
in the leading Classics encyclopedia, the famous Pauly-Wissowa, and such
artificial disciplinary divisions reached well into the twentieth century (and
indeed beyond). Note, for instance, that the first edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1949) lacked an entry ‘Christianity’ and its latest, fourth edition (2012) still does not contain an entry ‘Jesus’. It is undoubtedly because of this ideological and institutional legacy that for a long time Christianity was not seen as a subject fit for ancient historians.

In 1987, Robin Lane Fox published his *Pagans and Christians*, in which he surveyed pagan and Christian life from the second century until Constantine. Hardly surprisingly, he made extensive use of Harnack’s study, ‘an unsurpassed survey of the evidence’. Lane Fox’s sympathy is clearly with the pagans of whom he gives us a brilliant picture, even though with little eye for the slow changes that were undermining the traditional religion. Underlying much of his work, as he himself states in his preface, are the ‘voluminous writings of Louis Robert’ (1904–85: Lane Fox 1986, 10), the greatest epigrapher of modern times. This gives the first, pagan part a unity which his discussion of the Christians is somewhat lacking.

As with Gibbon, Harnack, and also Leppin, Lane Fox avoids theological issues. Instead, he concentrates on selected aspects of early Christianity, primarily as manifested in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. In an instructive introduction, in which he discusses well the spread of Christianity, the use of books and the prominence of women, he cites Gibbon’s five causes of Christianity’s missionary success, and wonders how ‘can Gibbon’s views be enlarged and adjusted?’ (Lane Fox 1986, 314). However, instead of systematically proceeding along those lines, Lane Fox gives us chapters on Christianity’s sexual mores, a subject treated by Gibbon in only three pages, on visions and prophecy, a subject not mentioned by Gibbon at all and hardly of the importance attached to it by Lane Fox, on persecution and martyrdom, and the role of the bishops.

In retrospect, it still impresses with its many perceptive observations and fine vignettes, such as of the martyr Pionius or of Bishop Gregory Thaumaturgus of Pontus. Yet, it is also highly selective and pays very little attention, for example, to the (later) sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist. It is also rather Gibbonian in his labelling of martyrs and sexual renouncers as ‘overachievers’, as if that is a helpful qualification in any meaningful way. It is equally Gibbonian in that it happily speaks of the Church, heresy and heretics, thus taking over the labelling by the majority of the Christians. With Lane Fox I end this brief and selective survey of previous studies of early Christianity by leading ancient historians. Whatever much they differ from one another, they all had in common that they looked at early Christianity as a fairly monolithic organisation and described the history of the period between Jesus’ death
and Constantine from a teleological perspective. And it is precisely at these points that a very different choice is made by Hartmut Leppin, to whose book we now turn.

Hartmut Leppin (b. 1963) is one of the leading ancient historians in Germany. Although he has also written on modern ancient historians, such as Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97), and on Thucydides and classical Athens, his main work until now concerns itself with later antiquity, which he basically studies until the arrival of Islam. His many studies of late antiquity, but also on the heritage of the ancient world today, often focus on aspects of Christianity, but are regularly written with one eye on contemporary issues. It is therefore no wonder that in 2015 he received the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz-Preis, the most prestigious prize for researchers in Germany, named after the great German polymath (1646–1716). Characteristically for Leppin, he has used the money (2.5 million euros) for a major project called ‘Polyphony of Late Antique Christianity’ to explore the diversity of Christianity in that period, but also to pose important questions about the relationship between a universal religion and empires, such as: does it support the stability of empires or does it pose a counterbalance? Was tolerance more likely to prevail in an empire due to its diversity? The project shows Leppin’s interest in diversity and in the relevance of antiquity for today. Not surprisingly, he has written important articles on Christianisations (note the plural) and the birth of the idea of religious freedom as well as a very recent book on frankness of speech in antiquity.

It is this stress on pluralities and diversity which one may perhaps single out as the most striking characteristic of Leppin’s book on the early Christians. We no longer hear of the Church and heretics, as in Gibbon and Lane Fox, or of just Christianity, as in Harnack. Leppin also explicitly rejects the term ‘Christianities’ and is reticent in using ‘Judaism’, as the former suggests local borders where these often were not yet present, just as the latter suggests an often non-existent uniformity. Instead, he opts for an approach that takes account of all groups that either thought of themselves as followers of Christ or were considered as such by others. He thus applies the Wittgensteinian concept of ‘family resemblance’ to the formulation of who was an early Christian in order to be as inclusive as possible. This has the consequence that in his book we meet groups that are omitted by Gibbon and Harnack, such as the Manichaeans, or those whom Leppin calls the Gnostic spectrum, who are virtually neglected by Lane Fox. In this way, Leppin shows us something of the great diversity of early Christianity, whereas in standard church histories the focus usually is on that part of Christianity that would become the hegemonic Church. It also
demonstrates that without Constantine’s choice for the ‘orthodox’ Church the shape of Christianity could have become very different.

A second striking characteristic of his book is that, unlike his predecessors, Leppin consistently locates Christian ideas and practices in reaction to, or resistance against, the Jews and Graeco-Roman religion. He shows us people who have to find their way after the death of Jesus in numerous problems for which Jesus himself or his very first followers, such as Paul, had not left any answers. As he concludes, to be an early Christian was not an easy matter.  

A third characteristic follows from Leppin’s rejection of a teleological approach in that he avoids putting his material in a chronological order. That was different with his predecessors, although with Harnack only partially so. Instead, he presents what he calls a kaleidoscopic approach that will show the various choices different Christians made in specific situations. To that end, Leppin quotes and discusses many sources in detail, much more than is normally the case in such a history. As he is interested in the agency of the early Christians, his approach is not that far removed from that of the stimulating Lived Ancient Religion propagated by Jörg Rüpke.  

The problem is of course that we are much better informed about the discourses than the practices of the early Christians. Still, papyri do occasionally show us Christians in action such as, for example, in letters to and from the later third-century Sotas of Oxyrhynchus (Section 2.4), whose function as bishop has now been confirmed by the recently discovered Ethiopic version of a lost History of the Episcopate of Alexandria. These letters can also illustrate Leppin’s illuminating approach of locating Christian practices between Jewish and Graeco-Roman ones.

In one of the letters, we hear of ‘a catechumen in Genesis’ (POxy. 36.2795). Now new Christians had to follow a formal instruction before they were allowed to become baptized, the so-called catechumenate (Section 2.4). The requirement is rather amazing as in traditional Greek and Roman religion there was no prescribed instruction. The young were religiously socialised by listening to stories and watching the performance of rituals. The Jews of the time around the Christian era probably did know some instruction, but that was limited to the family, with a special role for the father, and it was certainly not a requirement for some stage in their religious lives. The Christians had invented something new, which is still with us today, even if often in the form of a secular religious education. The letters suggest that there were various stages in the catechumenate, as we also hear of ‘catechumens of the congregation’ and ‘a catechumen in
the beginning of the gospel’ in the correspondence of Sotas. These stages are also helpful to get a better idea of the instruction of a famous martyr, Perpetua, to whose martyrdom account Leppin rightly pays much attention (Sections 3.1, 3.4). Perpetua’s first vision shows that she knew Genesis, as her treading upon the head of the snake (Passio 4.4, 7) is clearly inspired by Genesis (3.15: ‘he [Eve’s offspring] will strike your [the snake’s] head’). As the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria tells us that at Jerusalem the bishop started his instruction of the catechumens with reading Genesis and subsequently studied the whole of the Bible (Peregrinatio Egeriae 46.2), and Perpetua betrays hardly any knowledge of the New Testament, so she will have been a catechumen at a still initial stage.

Like his illustrious predecessors, Leppin lets his history basically start after the death and reported resurrection of Jesus, for which he typically compares Jewish and Roman parallels, such as Enoch and Romulus, in order to elucidate the Verständnishaarzont of the contemporaries. He also notes that the resurrection was a bone of contention for the early Christians, who certainly were not unanimous in its interpretation, unlike what many modern Evangelicals seem to think. Yet it is rather striking that Leppin and his predecessors, if for varying reasons, do not venture to locate Jesus within his time and place. Neither do they present a convincing picture of the devotion to God and Christ, who were not always strictly distinguished in the first centuries. Seemingly, the modern concentration on human actors leaves little space to discuss the devotion or the kind of faith that the early Christians had, whereas their focus on faith was unparalleled in contemporary religions.

Leppin divides his study in four sections, in which he, subsequently, looks at the ways the Christians defined themselves against Jews and pagans, their organisations and authorities, their everyday life, and their relation to the political establishment. In turn, these chapters are divided into subchapters that comprise a wealth of subjects, ranging from food and festivals, money and martyrs, to holiness and humility – to mention only some of them. A foreword is not the place for a detailed discussion of all these topics, which are analysed in considerable detail, but a few examples will illustrate some of the subjects examined by Leppin. As the problem of authority is clearly dear to his heart, but of course also a theme of the highest importance for any ancient historian, I will take my examples from the second chapter, that on authority.

At the moment of my writing (January 2023), television is showing the funeral of Pope Benedict XVI. The pomp and circumstance, however sober, leave no doubt that there is a clear authority in the Roman-Catholic
Church. It was rather different in early Christianity. There was no High Priest as with the Jews before the destruction of the temple or a pontifex maximus, as with the Romans. Who could exert authority was a matter of debate. This is a facet of early Christianity that Leppin elaborates from several angles. Very interestingly, he shows how there was not a straight line from the early charismatic preachers to the single bishop at the top in late antiquity, as one might have thought on the basis of Max Weber’s ideas regarding the transition from Personalcharisma to Amtscharisma.\(^{19}\) Even if true to a large extent, spiritual authority could always break through established structures. Philosophers, martyrs, prophets and prophetesses, hermits, monks – there was no guarantee that a bishop’s authority could not be undermined or challenged by any of these figures. Consequently, there always was a certain openness in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Although we might be inclined to think of males in connection with church authority, Leppin also draws attention to the prominent position of women in very early Christianity, even though later scribes sometimes tried to diminish their roles. Thus he singles out Prisca (or Priscilla), who with her husband is mentioned several times in the Acts of the Apostles (18) and Paul’s letter to the Romans (16.3–5), often even before her husband (Section 2.2). Indeed, from the women mentioned in the New Testament after the Gospels, she is the most prominent and, not surprisingly, her position had already drawn the attention of Harnack, who used her example in his attempts to enlarge the role of contemporary women in the Church.\(^{20}\) Like Harnack, although somewhat more sceptical regarding her historical background, Leppin also puts a spotlight on Thecla, the companion of Paul in the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, who breaks off her engagement, is the object of miracles and even baptizes herself. As he stresses, this Christian novel gives us an idea of what was possible to imagine regarding the role of women at that time (Section 2.2). Although he also notes that in the novel Thecla remains subordinated to Paul, the many translations, such as in Armenian, Latin and Coptic, her cult in Seleucia, and the addition of her name in some manuscripts of the New Testament all suggest that for many (female?) readers Thecla was an important identification figure. In fact, her name has now even turned up in a still unpublished Manichaean fragment in Middle Persian, found in Turfan, in northeast China: ‘The Holy Spirit also took as his mounts Simon, . . . Jacob, Cephas, Mariam, Martha, Paul, Peter, Thecla . . . ’.\(^{21}\) The juxtaposition with the names of famous apostles and women close to Jesus shows how high her status must have become, even in an area far from the Christian heartlands.
Very fascinating is also Leppin’s discussion of prominent Christian intellectuals, such as Justin Martyr, Origen and Julius Africanus (Section 2.4), of whom the latter two were even received in the highest circles of the Roman Empire. He shows how these men (hardly ever women) resembled pagan philosophers and acted as teachers, as did many non-Christian intellectuals of the Second Sophistic. Being in competition with one another, as Leppin notes, they played an important role in the development of the Christian doctrines with their writings, and are thus also part of the well-attested process of Intellektualisierung in the first centuries of our era. Their literary productivity was stimulated by the adoption of the codex, which, for reasons still not clear, the early Christians reserved in particular for the writings that would be part of the future New Testament; in this way, they contributed to the supplanting of the traditional scroll, although the use of codices among the Jews has perhaps been neglected. The prominence of books and letters (Section 2.9) in emerging Christianity is another aspect of this participation in the process of Intellektualisierung. Although perhaps not so much from contemporary Judaism, it distinguished them from traditional Greek and Roman religion, in which books were not absent, but did not play the same important role as in Judaism and Christianity, which could be described as textual communities. At the same time, the epistolary activity promoted a networking unequalled in other religions.

As Leppin notes, in the first centuries the Christian intellectuals were not necessarily part of the clergy, whereas in later times an Augustine or an Ambrosius would be elected into the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as bishops had evolved into the key figures of Christian intellectual life. And yet, as the study of the Scriptures was of the utmost importance for the Christians, there was always room for independent intellectuals to impress the faithful and the church hierarchy with their interpretations.

It is time to conclude. Overall, Leppin’s book is an important contribution to a better understanding of the place of the early Christians within the Roman Empire. He looks at them not with the irony of a Gibbon or Lane Fox nor from the apologetic perspective of a Harnack, but with critical empathy. These early Christians were people like us, people who had to negotiate their path in life in a society with many different traditions and choices to be made. Their diversity shows that there were always alternatives for their ways of life and thought. It will be the challenge for historians to integrate this brilliant kaleidoscopic picture into a history of emergent late antiquity.
Acknowledgements

This book took many years to bring to fruition. While I had initially focused on late antiquity, questions kept arising that invariably led back to earlier times. As a result, the first centuries of Christianity increasingly claimed centre stage in my work, which meant that – in many respects – I had to start right at the beginning. I am grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for awarding me a Koselleck grant for innovative projects; important sections of the book were written in the inspirational surroundings of Cambridge (UK) and others in quiet concentration, thanks to the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo.

I am equally grateful to a number of others: I owe much to the stimulating atmosphere of the cluster of excellence ‘The Formation of Normative Orders’ at Frankfurt and the PhD programme ‘Theology as an Academic Discipline’. The always lively exchange with my – very diverse set of – colleagues at Frankfurt was especially valuable: Stefan Alkier, Tilmann Allert and Alexander Weiß, as well as with those participating in my colloquia. Thomas Graumann and Judith Lieu discussed many knotty issues with me in Cambridge. Nadja Schäfer also deserves thanks, including for reading the original German publication. Matthias Kuta also read all chapters with a critical mind and compiled the index.

Others who supported my endeavour in various ways for which I am grateful are Alberto Camplani, Omar el-Manfalouty, Charlotte Hamway, Marius Kalfelis, Rubina Raja, Sophie Röder, Malte Rosenau, Thomas Schaumberg, Kilian Schütz, Julia Schwarzer and Sebastian Weinert.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the Gerda Henkel Stiftung for including this work in its ‘Historical Library’, generously supporting its original German publication. Stefan von der Lahr guided that project with equal patience and enthusiasm. The programme ‘Geisteswissenschaften International’ made the English translation possible. Katie Idle and Michael Sharp walked me through the process. I am extremely grateful to Kathrin Lüddecke who translated the book patiently and perceptively.
Sandra Kerka, the copyeditor of this volume, impressed me deeply with her painstaking, demanding and encouraging work. Some translations of ancient sources may sound somewhat archaic even though they have been revised for this book. They were specifically chosen to produce a sense of otherness and facilitate readers’ appreciation of how they themselves differ from early Christians.