

Early Christianity

Editors

Jens Schröter, Managing Editor (Berlin)

Jörg Frey (Zurich)

Simon Gathercole (Cambridge, U.K.)

Clare Rothschild (Chicago)



Mohr Siebeck

Early Christianity: An Editorial Manifesto

1.1 As the first decade of the 21st century draws to a close, it is a good time to think again about New Testament studies as a scholarly discipline. Is the present century opening up interpretative possibilities that may not have been so evident to the previous one? In which directions, and within which frameworks, should scholarship now develop?

1.2 The new journal is concerned with *early Christianity as a historical phenomenon*. Uncontroversial though that may sound, its editors share a quite specific understanding of this broad field of research. In seeking to further the study of early Christianity as a historical phenomenon, we aim to overcome certain limitations which – in our view – have hindered the development of the discipline. To identify a limitation is already to have seen the possibility of moving beyond it.

2.1 One such limitation has to do with the concept of the “New Testament” itself. Our concern is with early Christianity and its literature, and not just with the writings of the New Testament. Those who draw our attention to the significance of noncanonical texts are right to do so: the canonical texts should no longer be studied in isolation from the other Christian literature of the first two centuries or so. That is not to question or relativize the canonical status that came to be ascribed to these texts. Rather, it is to see this ascription of canonical status as an event occurring *within* the field of early Christian literature as a whole. While research will rightly continue to focus primarily on the canonical writings, there is much to be gained by setting them within a broader horizon, where other gospels, books of acts, epistles and apocalypses deserve attention alongside their proto-canonical counterparts.

2.2 In this journal, then, “early Christianity” is taken to cover not only the first Christian century but also the second. Until recently, it has been widely assumed that the early second century marks the dividing-line between two academic fields (New Testament studies and patristics), rather than an area of overlap. Influenced by traditional protestant views of church history, some

Early Christianity: An Editorial Manifesto

New Testament scholars have seen the second century as a period of decline, associating it with the “early catholicism” or “Greek metaphysics” or “proto-orthodoxy” that allegedly corrupted the original apostolic testimony. Even where no such bias is apparent, the second century is *in practice* widely regarded as marginal to the core concerns of New Testament scholarship. Yet this self-limitation makes no sense, given that the collection known as “the New Testament” is itself the outcome of a reception-process that extends to the end of the second century and beyond. Only recently has the crucial concept of *reception* begun to attract serious attention from New Testament scholars, as the necessary counterpart to the conventional emphasis on *production*. By viewing the New Testament as the creation of the second century as well as the first, we intend this journal to contribute to a long overdue reorientation.

2.3 This journal will not, however, give any *special* prominence to reception-history or to the second century. To repeat: its object is early Christianity as a historical phenomenon – that is, early Christianity as its historical reality presents itself to us. The total phenomenon comprises a kaleidoscopic range of individual phenomena, including communal structures, social norms, discursive practices, points of conflict, material remains, and much else – far more than just the production and reception of texts. Everywhere the phenomena of early Christianity are intimately related to the still more diverse phenomena of the surrounding environment, and these relationships are too complex and open-ended to be confined within any single framework of enquiry. The scholarly tradition has rightly emphasized the importance of the original context as a hermeneutical key to the New Testament writings. Yet it has become clear that an “original context” is not reducible to a closed system, in the form perhaps of a so-called “situation” within a particular congregation. In that sense, there is no single original context, but rather *a multiplicity of contexts* – linguistic, literary, social, political, philosophical, theological, and so on. The ever-increasing quantity and quality of the available data requires us to recognize the multiplicity of contexts relevant to the phenomena of early Christianity. The tendency to assume a single normative context – an exclusively Jewish or Hellenistic background, for example – must be set aside. This journal will strive to reflect this multiplicity

Early Christianity: An Editorial Manifesto

of contexts, in the expectation of new light on our subject-matter from a variety of angles. One way in which it will concretely demonstrate this aim is by inviting contributions from scholars outside of our immediate discipline, such as historians and classicists.

2.4 In seeking to further the study of early Christianity “as a historical phenomenon”, we have no intention of marginalizing *theology*. In the study of early Christianity, theological concerns of one kind or another are rarely absent for long, irrespective of the personal views of the scholar in question. The phenomena of early Christianity are *necessarily* of interest to any theology that holds fast to the historical particularities integral to Christian truth-claims. Naturally, there is a potential danger of theologically motivated distortion of the historical evidence. But distortion of historical evidence can also occur in anti-theological or a-theological forms; and conversely, theological motivations can lead not to distortion but to insight. Biblical scholarship participates in a range of interdisciplinary conversations, and an ongoing dialogue with theology is one instance of this among others.

3.1 It need hardly be said that this journal will not promote any particular theology, and will welcome the contributions of scholars from the widest possible range of religious and non-religious backgrounds. The increasing co-operation of protestant, catholic, orthodox, Jewish and non-religious scholars is currently one of the most promising aspects of our discipline, and has fundamentally changed its social composition. No less significant is the increasing participation of women scholars. This social transformation is already producing a diversity of perspectives on our subject-matter, and we expect this to be reflected in every issue of this journal.

3.2 It is equally important that, in our diversity, we all participate in a common scholarly heritage. Of particular concern to the editors of this journal is the tendency for English- and German-language scholarship to drift apart from one another, so that developments within one scholarly community are often little known within the other. Evidence of this mutual ignorance may be found all too easily in footnotes and bibliographies. In Germany this isolationism may reflect a sense of German priority in the field

Early Christianity: An Editorial Manifesto

of critical biblical scholarship. In English-speaking contexts, a similar isolationism may stem from the worldwide spread of the English language, with the cultural and political attitudes that this engenders. The new journal is concerned to foster scholarly conversations that cross this particular linguistic barrier – something that it is uniquely well placed to do.

3.3 *Early Christianity* will appear four times a year. Each issue will contain four (or five) articles, at least one of which will be in German, together with sections devoted to new books, new discoveries, and new projects. Every alternate issue will be devoted to a specific theme, and will be the primary responsibility of each of the four co-editors in turn. These “themed” issues will include an editorial introduction; articles will be specially commissioned. Agreed topics for these issues are “New Directions in Pauline Theology” (edited by Francis Watson), “Jesus and his Contexts” (Jens Schröter), “Eucharist Traditions in early Christianity” (Clare Rothschild) and “Christology and its early Jewish Roots” (Jörg Frey). The “open” issues of the journal will include articles on any topic that falls within its scope, as outlined here. We welcome submissions in both English and German. We also welcome short submissions in either language for our new discoveries and new projects sections. A book review section will focus on the most significant newly published works.

3.4 We believe that *Early Christianity* has a major contribution to make to the further development of our field, and we look forward to the scholarly conversations that the journal will foster.