TEXTS, TRADITIONS, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES:

PROGRAM OUTLINE

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*Rationale*

The Program will investigate how one ancient community’s identity was shaped and reshaped in its engagement with normative texts and traditions. The community in question is the Christian church of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, which originated in a new religious movement within the diverse sphere of Second Temple Judaism and rapidly spread across much of the Mediterranean world and beyond. As it did so, it faced repeated challenges from without and within to explain and legitimate its existence. In responding to such challenges it found a valuable resource in the texts and traditions at its disposal.

A community’s identity is its answer to the deceptively simple question: *Who are we?* A community that does not address this question of identity is unthinkable, for without a tacit or explicit sense of identity the community would be indistinguishable from “society”, the larger social entity in which it is embedded. An identity is thus the declaration of a difference and a boundary: in asking, *Who are we?* one also asks, *Who is other than us?* and, *What makes us different?* A claim to an identity may be accompanied by the ascription of a corresponding negative identity to the other. Yet discourse around identity need not serve a polemical agenda; it can also function as an ideal to which a community may aspire, articulated for example through ritual. All those with a stake in the continued existence of a community must engage constantly with the question of identity, not just by repeating established answers but also by adapting or transforming them in the face of changing circumstances and requirements. These acts of repetition, adaptation, or transformation all draw on the resources of tradition, the collective wisdom handed down from the past so as to be available for every new present. And tradition takes peculiarly concentrated and explicit form in “normative” written texts – that is, more or less ancient writings whose ongoing claim on the present is formally beyond question even though the nature and implications of their significance may be disputed.

The diverse ways in which a community engages with its own texts and traditions are summed up in the term “reception”. In this usage, reception is understood as an *act* and not just as a passive submission to a normative past to which the present must be wholly subservient. Reception does indeed receive from a normative past, but it also reconfigures that which is received, appropriating it for the present and putting it to uses that may be quite other than what was originally expected and intended. Thus a troubled letter from a controversial and atypical Christian missionary to a small group he has founded is later incorporated into a larger collection now held to embody authentic apostolic instruction and guidance for all Christians everywhere. The transformation is not occasioned merely by the inherent power of Pauline rhetoric. It occurs in consequence of multiple actions undertaken by users of these texts, including copying and dissemination, liturgical usage, and citation in support of approved theological opinions or refutation of deviant ones.

In its focus on the reception of texts and traditions in the specific process of early Christian identity construction, the Program breaks new ground and challenges existing disciplinary structures at the following points:

(1) *From origins to reception* The Program seeks to further a reorientation within the discipline of New Testament studies towards the reception of texts. The post-Enlightenment biblical scholarly tradition has tended to highlight the role of human authors, in reaction against the concept of the singular divine author assumed in the older doctrine of inspiration. Recently this focus on the human author and the historical circumstances of origin has been criticized by proponents of a reader-centred hermeneutic for which canonical texts or traditions are the product of communities of users and not just of individual authors. Authors themselves may be readers of texts and creative exponents of traditions, and their own texts persist only insofar as they are adopted and adapted for ongoing use by communities of readers. The overarching concept here is that of *reception*, understood as a constructive activity in which new identities are forged out of existing resources.

(2) *Reception and identity* Current scholarly work on the reception of canonical texts tends to view the act of interpreting a text as an end in itself, with only limited reference to its pragmatic, historically-situated goals. One asks *how* a text is being interpreted without proceeding to ask what the interpretation is *for.* By linking the concepts of reception and identity, the Program will counter this tendency towards ahistorical abstraction, exploring the various ways in which the interpretation of texts serves the construction and articulation of communal identity. At the same time, the Program’s focus on specific acts of interpretation will avoid the limitations of a functionalist understanding of texts and traditions as mere tools for the achievement of abstract social goals. Hermeneutical and social-scientific perspectives on texts and traditions are often assumed to be mutually exclusive, and the Program will demonstrate that this is not the case and that each perspective can and should be informed by the other.

(3) *Reception and meaning* The Program will criticize the widespread assumption that investigating the reception of a text is no more than an optional supplement to the study of what a text is and means “in itself”, as intended by its author within a specific set of historical circumstances. On that view, a text’s reception may tell us little or nothing about the text itself. The Program will seek to show how diverse or even contradictory interpretations of the same text may nevertheless actualize aspects of the text’s own semantic potential, as it is put to use in later and different contexts. Reception – that is, being read and used – is inherent to the phenomenon of the text, which does not remain unaffected by what its readers and users subsequently do with it. Reception thus has a retroactive effect on the source text; it is a circular process and not a unilinear one.

(4) *Reception and tradition* The Program will extend the concept of reception to cover “traditions” as well as texts. Traditions may be articulated in or shaped by texts, yet their primary location is a community’s discursive practices. While our access to an ancient community’s discursive practices is inevitably textually mediated, the concept of tradition enables us to extend the scope of reception beyond cases where a later text is directly dependent on an earlier one. By linking reception to tradition as well as to identity, the Program will highlight the communal context of reception rather than viewing it as a purely intratextual phenomenon.

(5) *The “New Testament” in communal context* The Program’s orientation towards the reception of texts enables it to question the conventional boundary between the disciplines of New Testament studies and patristics, a boundary which corresponds roughly to the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. It is widely assumed that all but a few of the New Testament texts had come into existence by then, and that the mere fact of their composition is already sufficient to constitute them as “New Testament.” In reality, the New Testament as a canonical collection is as much the product of the 2nd century as of the 1st. Modern New Testament scholarship’s all-but-exclusive focus on the 1st century reflects the long-discredited concept of an “apostolic age” qualitatively different from the period that followed. In reality, New Testament studies and patristics represent overlapping sub-fields within the broader field of “early Christianity”, viewed as a complex, diverse, and evolving entity in which sharp chronological demarcations are out of place.

#### Aims

The Program will address the question: How did the earliest Christian communities employ texts and traditions ascribed to a sacred past to negotiate issues relating to their identity – who they were, why they existed, how they differed from others? Otherwise expressed: How far is early Christian reception of normative texts and traditions motivated by the need for communal self-definition in the face of perceived challenges and threats arising from within and without? The first version of the question asks about the role of texts and traditions in the work of identity construction; the second asks about the role of identity construction in the reception and deployment of texts and traditions. Whether the emphasis lies on identity or reception, the fundamental aim is to investigate the interaction of these two concepts, each of which represents a constitutive element in early Christian communal life.

More specifically, the four fundamental aims of the Program are as follows:

(1) *To view the first two Christian centuries as a continuum, dispensing with the arbitrary boundary between a normative first century that allegedly produced most of the “New Testament” writings and a second century assumed to have been characterized by qualitatively different forms of textual production and communal organization.* Since it is the ongoing circulation and reception of texts that ultimately assigns “canonical” status to some of them but not others, the “New Testament” is as much a work of textual reception as of textual production. The conventional disciplinary boundary between “New Testament studies” and “patristics” is an ideological construct with deep confessional roots. It represents an extreme example of the potential for distortion inherent in all forms of historical periodization.

(2) *To investigate early Christian appropriations of a Jewish heritage within an ethnically diverse church in which “Judaism” was for the most part culturally alien.* As a precondition for understanding this reception and appropriation of Jewish scripture (eventually rebranded as the Christian “Old Testament”), it is important to determine the ethnic composition of early Christian communities. If early Christian mission transplants a Jewish heritage derived from the church’s Jewish roots into new cultural and ethnic contexts, this creates the precondition for free, selective, and critical appropriations of that heritage, ranging from direct assimilation to creative reconfiguration to outright rejection. The question how far the core Christian message remains dependent on its original Jewish context became a key factor in the reconstruction of Christian identities based on the polarity of “orthodoxy” and “heresy”, which in turn decisively shaped the ongoing process of textual reception.

(3) *To trace the development of a self-consciously Christian heritage based on the widely disseminated notion of a primitive “golden age” from which the more recent past and the present represent a steep decline.* In the ancient world in contrast to the modern one, the old is often represented as authentic, ideal, and true whereas the new is belated, degenerate, and false. In christianized form, the golden age is the age of the apostles and their immediate successors, and of the texts and traditions believed to derive from them. It would be hard to exaggerate the historical significance of this schema, which underlies the creation of a “New Testament”, the ongoing production of works ascribed pseudonymously to apostles or recounting their (usually legendary) exploits, and the deployment of individual apostles as role models for Christian conduct or as patrons of churches claiming an association with them. Inevitably, however, competing models of Christian identity resulted in different estimations of the primitive heritage; on occasion even apostles can be sharply criticized.

(4) *To develop a broader concept of reception that includes not only texts but also traditions – for example, ritual practices embodying the community’s social memory of their basis in the life and teaching of Jesus, as communicated through the apostles – and that also attends to the diverse institutional contexts, interpretative genres, and cultural assumptions that shape the reception of texts and traditions.* Texts are not received in a vacuum, nor is identity constructed only in the reception of texts. The reception of texts is accompanied by the repeated performance of ritual actions, the intention of which is to to superimpose a new Christian identity upon the old “natural” one. Ritual too is drawn into inter-communal competition, as one community is defined or defines itself by its rejection of the practices of another.

*Projects*

The research program will consist in three interrelated projects, summarized below. PLEASE NOTE that the summary of Project 1 is included for information only**. Applications for postdoctoral positions are invited in connection with Project 2 and Project 3**.

[Project 1: Early Christian Gospels and the Conflict of Identities]

[This Project will highlight the different and competing accounts of Christian identity at stake in the reception of early Christian gospels and gospel-related traditions in the literature of the 2nd century. There will be a particular focus on important but under-researched texts preserved in various Coptic dialects, which the Project will seek to bring into the mainstream of early Christian studies by investigating connections and contrasts with the canonical gospels. The Project will highlight the diversity of early Christian identities, in opposition to the traditional binary divide between (proto-)orthodoxy and heresy, and it will investigate how those often competing identities are constructed both in the complex interplay of earlier and newly created gospel texts and in the development of ritual practices prescribed by (or ascribed to) a tradition believed to stem from Jesus himself. A key issue on which early gospels divide is over the relevance or otherwise of Jewish scriptural texts and practices for Christian identity.]

Project 2: Jewish Traditions and the Making of Christian Identity

The early Christian movement was formed within the matrix of Judaism; nearly all its leaders in its first generation were Jews steeped in the Jewish tradition, not least in the textual heritage of the Jewish scriptures. At the same time, already in its first generation it attracted converts from a non-Jewish heritage, who in many early churches came to outnumber Jewish members; before long some of these Gentile believers became intellectual and organisational leaders in the Christian movement. Early Christianity thus provides a case study in the migration and transformation of a cultural heritage, while the differentiated reception, adaptation and transformation of Jewish texts and traditions in early Christian churches had a decisive effect on the formation of early Christian identities. The process was complex and contested (both in antiquity and today): did the early Christian movement ‘Judaize’ non-Jews by inducting them into Jewish texts, theologies and practices, or did it in effect (even if not in intention) ‘deJudaize’ this Jewish heritage by merging it with non-Jewish traditions and embedding it in communities whose practices and loyalties soon came to diverge in significant ways from the Jewish community? This project aims to analyse the reception of Jewish texts and traditions in the first two centuries, with a special focus on the mission of Paul, on the churches he founded or influenced, and on the traditions that draw on his name.

Project 3: Negotiating the Primitive Christian Heritage

As the early church developed it became increasingly aware of a distinctively Christian heritage of its own, in addition to the texts and traditions derived from its Jewish roots. Inspiration for Christian life and thought could now be found not only in the great figures of the history of Israel but also in the apostles and holy women of the core Christian narrative and in their post-apostolic successors. Certain early Christian writings gradually acquired a comparable status and authority to Jewish scripture, and in some respects even surpassed it. This Project will investigate how traditions and texts attributed to a primitive Christian “golden age” were deployed to serve the interests and concerns of later generations, and how their reception relates (or does not relate) to their significance within their originating historical contexts. It will draw on the resources of “social memory theory” as it investigates the role of inscribed traces of an actual past in the creation of accounts of a “canonical past” tailored to fit later institutional contexts and models of ecclesial identity. The Project will also analyze how the construction of a Christian heritage entails the christianizing and de-judaizing of the church’s Jewish heritage.