1

The Bauer Thesis: An Overview

Rodney J. Decker

Controversies regarding Jesus and the early Jesus movement are certainly not new, dating back now several centuries.[1] Philip Jenkins summarizes an often-forgotten history of the proposals which have been "a perennial phenomenon within Western culture since the Enlightenment."[2] The primary impetus for the recent outbreak of speculation has not been the discovery of new data very different from what we have known for a long time. Rather it is, claims Jenkins, a philosophical/ideological shift in Western culture: the rise of postmodernism and its entailments.[3]

One of the current writers in the media spotlight is Bart Ehrman. He is not the first nor only voice advocating a radical overhaul of our conception of early Christianity.[4] He has been, however, one of the more

1. For an overview of the various "Jesus Quests," see Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*; Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?*; Johnson, *Real Jesus*; Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede;* later titled *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung,* 2nd German ed., ET, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 2nd English ed.; Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*; Witherington *Jesus Quest,* 2nd ed.; and Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*; and, on a broader scale, Baird, *History of New Testament Research,* 3 vols.

2. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, 15; see his summary on pp. 13–15.

3. Ibid., 15–20, 124–47, 169–77. I have not attempted to track all the reasons for the contemporary speculation, being content with noting only the most significant issues.

4. For similar literature, see Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*; Lüdemann, *Heretics*; Hopkins, *World Full of Gods*; Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*; Dart, *Jesus of Heresy and History*;

visible and influential voices.[5] This is due to several factors. First, he is a first-rate scholar in a significant discipline, New Testament textual criticism. In this regard he has justifiably benefited from his association with the "dean" of that field, Bruce Metzger.[6] He is also a good writer and effective communicator. In addition, he has achieved broad media exposure for his popularization of more scholarly work.[7] His major publications relevant to the history of early Christianity include the following:

- *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (1993)
- *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (2003)
- *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (2003)
- *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005)
- *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know about Them)* (2009)
- *Forged: Writing in the Name of God, Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (2011)
- *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (2014)

The thesis which Ehrman proposes runs as follows, in his own words. After listing a wide range of phenomena in the diverse groups comprising "Christendom"[8]—including everything from Roman Catholic mis-

Funk, *Honest to Jesus*; and Ruether, *Women and Redemption*.

5. The real issues are not in Ehrman, though he builds on them; he is only the most recent popularizer of much older ideas. Perhaps this record of my explorations (and excavations!) in the piles that have accumulated in my study of late will be of help in orienting others to the issues which Ehrman's writings have raised.

6. Ehrman was one of Metzger's last two PhD students in textual criticism at Princeton (the other being Michael Holmes) and he was selected to prepare the most recent revision of Metzger's standard textbook, *Text of the New Testament*, 4th ed.

7. Ehrman has been featured on National Public Radio, has served as a consultant for major media specials on related topics (e.g., the Gospel of Judas), and has achieved significant rankings on bestseller lists.

8. The use of "Christendom" is my term, intended to be understood as a very broad cover term for any and all groups that profess any form of allegiance to Jesus and/or

sionaries, snake handlers, Greek Orthodoxy, fundamentalists, mainline churches, to David Koresh—Ehrman writes,

> All this diversity of belief and practice, and the intolerance that occasionally results, makes it difficult to know whether we should think of Christianity as one thing or lots of things, whether we should speak of Christianity or Christianities.
>
> What could be more diverse than this variegated phenomenon, Christianity in the modern world? In fact, there may be an answer: Christianity in the ancient world. . . .
>
> Most of these ancient forms of Christianity are unknown to people in the world today, since they eventually came to be reformed or stamped out. As a result, the sacred texts that some ancient Christians used to support their religious perspectives came to be proscribed, destroyed, or forgotten—in one way or another lost. . . .
>
> Virtually all forms of modern Christianity . . . go back to *one* form of Christianity that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the second and third centuries. This one form of Christianity decided what was the "correct" Christian perspective; it decided who could exercise authority over Christian belief and practice; and it determined what forms of Christianity would be marginalized, set aside, destroyed. It also decided which books to canonize into Scripture and which books to set aside as "heretical," teaching false ideas.
>
> And then, as a coup de grâce, this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been "orthodox" (i.e., the "right belief") and that its opponents in the conflict, with their other scriptural texts, had always represented small splinter groups invested in deceiving people into "heresy."
>
> It is striking that, for centuries, virtually everyone who studied the history of early Christianity simply accepted the version of the early conflicts written by the orthodox victors. This all began to change in a significant way in the nineteenth century as some scholars began to question the "objectivity" of such early Christian writers as the fourth-century orthodox writer Eusebius, the so-called Father of Church History, who reproduced

---

the term *Christian*. Ehrman calls it simply "Christianity"—without delineation as to how that ought to be defined.

> for us the earliest account of the conflict. This initial query into Eusebius's accuracy eventually became, in some circles, a virtual onslaught on his character, as twentieth-century scholars began to subject his work to an ideological critique that exposed his biases and their role in his presentation. This reevaluation of Eusebius was prompted, in part, by the discovery of additional ancient books . . . other Gospels, for example, that also claimed to be written in the names of apostles.[9]

Ehrman is quite right that this is not the traditional portrait of early Christianity. But it is by no means original with him, though he has done as much to popularize it as anyone in recent years. The real credit for this view of history belongs to Walter Bauer, so we will fittingly commence with the fountain and by first examining Bauer's influential thesis.[10]

Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (1934)

Brilliant, profound, extremely well read, indefatigable—these are all accurate descriptions of the German scholar to whom we owe much.[11] Although taking sharp issue with Bauer's thesis under consideration, I have a great respect for his lexical work.[12] No serious work in New Testament

9. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 1, 4, 5.

10. It is possible that the core of Bauer's ideas are much older; Harold O. J. Brown refers to Johann Semler's contention that "the present canon is arbitrary and represents the victory of the Roman see in the ecclesiastical politics of the early church" (Brown, *Heresies*, 71; citing Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons*, but no page reference is given; I have not had access to Semler's work to see if the idea is developed further).

There are definitely other contributing factors, most of which are closer at hand than Semler's eighteenth-century work. Michel Desjardins comments that Bauer's "study was a natural extension of a preceding century's scholarly work," listing the Tübingen school (F. C. Baur), the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,* and Harnack's work on heresy and the gnostics as direct contributors to the thesis of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond," 67–68). See also Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined,* 15–18, who qualifies the nature of the relationship between Tübingen/F. C. Baur and Walter Bauer's argument.

11. In this section references to the English translation of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* are given parenthetically (as is also the case in other summaries that follow). The sketch given here cannot be complete due to limitations of space, but the main lines of Bauer's argument are traced, though without much of his supporting evidence. I have tried to make the summary just that and refrain from critique at this point. When unavoidable, I have added my comments in a footnote.

12. My extensive tributes (and corrections) to BDAG may be found at www.

exegesis is possible without reference to his lexicon, whether the third English edition[13] or the sixth German edition.[14] But before the professor from Göttingen turned his attention to lexicography[15] Walter Bauer (1877–1960) published several works on the history of the early church, including a 1903 study of the Syrian canon of the epistles in the fourth and fifth centuries[16] and another in 1909 of Jesus in the apocrypha.[17] Bauer published a major work in 1934 which has had major influence in its field over the last eighty years: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*[18]—a "paradigm-shaping book."[19] Although widely discussed on the Continent and in England,[20] it was not until the release of an English translation almost forty years later that its impact was noticeably felt in America.[21] Since that time it has influenced almost every discussion of the topic.[22] *Orthodoxy and Heresy* is not a full statement of Bauer's ideas

ntresources.com/blog/?s=bdag. It should be noted that Danker's contributions to the English edition are at least equally valuable with Bauer's original work.

13. Edited by Frederick Danker. The first English translation, known as "BAG," appeared in 1957, based on the 4th German edition. The second English edition of 1979 ("BAGD") was based on the fifth edition of the German work.

14. Aland, Aland, and Reichmann, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wöterbuch*, 6th ed. The third English edition is known as BDAG (Bauer and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*). See Decker, "Using BDAG."

15. Bauer was the editor for the 1928, second edition of Preuschen's lexicon with the third edition of 1937 bearing Bauer's name alone. The fourth edition in 1949–1952 was the most significant revision, followed by a fifth edition, the last edited by Bauer, in 1957–1958; a sixth edition of the German work appeared in 1988 For a more detailed history of BDAG, see Decker, "Using BDAG." Jerry Flora's dissertation provides a broad review of Bauer's life and scholarly career (Flora, "Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer's Theory," 23–35).

16. Bauer, *Der Apostolos der Syrer*.

17. Bauer, *Das Leben Jesu*.

18. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. The text of the two editions is essentially the same with only typographical corrections; the major difference is the addition of two essays by Strecker in the second edition.

19. Bingham, "Development and Diversity," 50.

20. See Strecker, "Reception of the Book," 286–316 for a listing of reviews and an extensive discussion of reactions to Bauer's German work.

21. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.

22. A surprising exception is the 500-page work on heresy by H. O. J. Brown (*Heresies*). I can find no citation of Bauer in the footnotes and he is not listed in the index. Although one chapter bibliography lists the title (chap. 2, p. 22), there is no interaction with Bauer in the chapter.

regarding the origins of "orthodoxy" and "heresy," but this limited essay does not allow a broader discussion of Bauer's other writings.[23]

Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* argues that we cannot merely assume that orthodoxy came first and that heresy is a later deviation, for in doing so we "simply agree with the judgment of the anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period" (xxi). This is neither scientific nor fair since we are listening to only one voice—that of the winners; we do not allow the losers to speak for themselves. "Perhaps . . . certain manifestations of Christian life that the authors of the church renounce as 'heresies' originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply 'Christianity.' The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority" (xxii).

This is the hypothesis that Bauer proposes to test, though Bauer's professed neutral critical method too frequently slips into the role of defense lawyer or apologist for the heretics rather than impartial judge of the evidence.[24] The evidence he examines in subsequent chapters is considered geographically, area by area, to determine the evidence for what form/s of Christianity are attested in the earliest discernible period. Bauer begins with Edessa and follows with Egypt, Antioch, Asia Minor, and Rome.

Syrian Edessa, located on a tributary of the Euphrates just north of the present north-central border of Turkey and Syria, is the focus of Bauer's first chapter. After discrediting all traditional accounts of the origins of Christianity in Edessa, Bauer argues that the original form of Christianity there was Marcionite (and that not until mid-second century, followed by Bardesanes and his followers shortly afterwards). It was not until the end of the second century that there is any trace of what came later to be known as "orthodoxy," which remained a small minority through the fourth century. Only in the fifth century is orthodoxy finally imposed on Edessa by the "rather coarse methods" of Bishop Rabbula, the "tyrant of Edessa" (27). The "beginnings for the history of Christianity in Edessa" rest on "an unmistakably heretical basis" (43).

23. For a survey of the relevant material from Bauer's previous books and articles, see Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity," 299–311.

24. I have read similar statements several times and do not know who originated the analogy. For two representative instances, see Moffat, "Review," 475 ("he tends to take the position of the barrister rather than of the judge"); and Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond," 68n9 ("his professed impartiality shifts at times to an apologist on behalf of the 'heretics'").

Egypt next receives attention. Bauer declines to be discouraged by the silence of the sources regarding the early history of Christianity in Egypt since Edessan history establishes the pattern. Why would the churchmen have been "silent about the origins of Christianity in such an important center as Alexandria if there had been something favorable to report?" (45). The answer, though conjectural, is clear: Egyptian Christianity was, like Edessa, heretical in origin. The earliest form of the faith was gnostic no later than the beginning of the second century. Not until the end of that century does "orthodoxy" appear and "even into the third century, no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished" (59).

Bauer then turns to Antioch, which, though seeming to the reader of the New Testament to be a bastion of normative Christianity,[25] had long been heavily influenced by heretical movements. Since the time of Paul's defeat there (Gal 2), Antioch "played no significant role in the history of the church" (63)—that is the proto-orthodox church. Instead there was a syncretistic mixture of "Jewish Christianity," Gentile Christianity [i.e., what was left of Paul's influence], and Gnosticism. Not until the "frantic concern" (63) of Ignatius in the early second century is there a renewed attempt to reestablish "orthodoxy." Ignatius, however, is not a reliable source since his exuberance causes him to lose "all sense of proportion . . . [so] one must be especially careful in evaluating the accuracy of his statements" (61). His attempt to impose a powerful monarchical bishop structure on the church is a political move by someone in a minority position attempting to gain power and control (62).

Asia Minor also shows unmistakable gnostic influence, and that *within* the churches, as reflected in the Johannine literature.[26] Ignatius's letters to churches in Asia Minor are also relevant in this regard, since they reflect the limit of his influence. He can expect to be heard in only a few churches, and even then he is attempting to "stretch the circle of his influence as widely as possible" (79). It is significant that four of the churches in the region which had earlier been addressed in the Apocalypse are not included in Ignatius's list. Since these are the churches most

25. Bauer declines to consider New Testament evidence since it "seems to be both too unproductive and too much disputed to be able to serve as a point of departure" (Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy,* xxv).

26. John the "apocalyptic seer" is not very useful for the current question according to Bauer since his "extremely confused religious outlook that peculiarly mixes Jewish, Christian, and mythological elements and ends up in chiliasm . . . [a] stormy outburst, seething with hate" marks him, not as an intellectual or spiritual leader of influence, but only as a proponent of "wishful thinking" (Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 77–78).

severely rebuked by John, it is evident that they moved into full-blown heresy by the time of Ignatius (78–79). That Hierapolis and Colossae are "bypassed in icy silence by both John and Ignatius" (80) further reflects the lack of influence of orthodoxy in this area. Peter likewise is very selective in his address to the churches of Asia Minor (1 Pet 1:1), leaving large "blank spots on the map" of Asian orthodoxy: "there simply was nothing to be gained for 'ecclesiastically' oriented Christianity in that area at that time" (82). Even Ephesus, often perceived as the bastion of Pauline orthodoxy, has been lost to that cause by the end of the first century, perhaps to the extent that Paul's foundational labors there had been forgotten. Paul "lost the contest in Ephesus" (85), something that was becoming evident even during his lifetime. "Orthodoxy" was only reorganized much later when the apostle John became their patron, likely due to the arrival of Jewish Christians (including John and Philip) from Jerusalem following the war with Rome. Yet even this did not result in an "orthodox" victory since the Pastorals still reflect a major problem with Gnosticism in the second century (89).

Next Bauer considers the Roman church and its tactics in establishing their particular brand of Christianity as the dominant form worldwide. The initial foray in this direction is Bauer's study of *1 Clement*, the letter from the church of Rome to the Corinthian church written near the end of the first century. We cannot trust the direct statements of this biased letter, says Bauer, but must read between the lines to reconstruct the actual situation which prompted the letter and decipher the real motivation for Rome's letter. "Rome takes action not when it is overflowing with love or when the great concerns of the faith are really in jeopardy, but when there is at least the opportunity of enlarging its own sphere of influence" (97–98).

The first evidence we have of this Roman strategy is in relation to the church at Corinth, reflected in the letter of *1 Clement*. In that situation "internal discord greatly reduced the power of resistance of the Corinthian church, so that it seemed to be easy prey" (98). The specifics there involve the usurpation of the existing church leaders by younger ones; Rome writes in an effort to reinstate the older leaders who were more favorable to the Roman position. The conflict goes all the way back to Paul. Those rebuked by him as "the strong" were gnostics who, though silenced at the time, had gradually increased in number (their position was more attractive to the community than Paul's approach), though they chafed under the repressive leadership of the church. By the

time of *1 Clement* they had become strong enough to oust the leaders (which by this time were a coalition of the Paul and Cephas parties) and to take over the church (100–101), perhaps even imposing an "energetic bishop" on the previously plural presbyterate (112). "Rome succeeded in imposing its will on Corinth" to the extent that a half century later the Corinthian church still accepted Roman authority and read *1 Clement* in their services (104). And so began the Roman movement to consolidate her authority one church at a time, culminating in the exclusive establishment of Rome's brand of Christianity, now branded as "orthodoxy," in the fourth century.

The Roman juggernaut evidenced itself in later claims of apostolic succession used in the fight against heresy, not only in Rome but elsewhere under Roman influence. Rome also extended her influence through teaching Christians in other places and also through generous financial gifts—and "such gifts were not the least reason why their opponents emerged victorious" (122, seeming to imply that Rome's opponents were "bought"). Bauer cites Eusebius's (much later) comment as reflective of a practice that had been operative earlier as well:

> The encomium of Eusebius upon the Emperor Constantine (3.58) teaches us that Rome viewed it as an altogether legitimate practice in religious controversy to tip the scales with golden weights: "In his beneficent concern that as many as possible be won for the teaching of the gospel, the emperor also made rich donations there [in Phoenician Heliopolis] for the support of the poor, with the aim of rousing them even in this way to the acceptance of saving truth (123).[27]

The following two chapters trace the rhetoric in the orthodoxy-heresy debate, as well as the use of literature. Both parties used written documents, and each used whatever means possible to discredit their opponents, to the extent of falsifying and/or destroying documents (160) and even modifying their own source documents to more clearly make their case (160, supported with several pages of illustration from the *Odyssey*!). The various polemical writings employed cannot be trusted to represent accurately the opponents' position, and since the "orthodox" came to hold the privileged position, we have little from the heretics' own pens even though they were the more prolific writers (194). The most extensive "orthodox" writer, Eusebius, is not to be trusted; his "serious

27. Bracketed material is original in Bauer.

misuse of the superlative" (and other problems), says Bauer, "is sufficient to remove any inclination I might have to take such assertions seriously" (192). Other than his citations from other writers, little is useful; "we cannot establish any firm foothold on the basis of what Eusebius himself contributes" (192).

Traditional literature is treated next: the use of the Old Testament as well as divergent gospels. "At that point there probably was no version of Christianity worthy of note that did not have at its disposal at least *one* written gospel, in which Jesus appears as the bearer and guarantor of that particular view" (203). Though the other gospels were accepted fairly early (especially Mark and Matthew), John's gospel was viewed with suspicion in orthodox Rome almost from the start (208). It was rather the preferred gospel of the gnostics and other heretics. "When the gospel canon was defined, which was to be valid for the entire church, Rome found itself overruled, to put it rather crudely" (212).[28]

When we come to the epistles, Paul is nearly irrelevant to early Roman orthodoxy, being the darling of many of the heretics (215–25). Bauer's summary is worth citing.

> Perhaps, as the situation developed, some would have preferred henceforth to exclude Paul completely. . . . But it was already too late for that. Rome (together with the "church," which it led) had already accepted too much from the Apostle to the Gentiles, had appealed to him too often, suddenly to recognize him no longer. . . . 1 Corinthians had proved itself to be extremely productive for purposes of church politics in the hands of Rome. . . .
>
> . . . I am inclined to see the pastoral Epistles as an attempt on the part of the church unambiguously to enlist Paul as part of its anti-heretical front and to eliminate the lack of confidence in him in ecclesiastical circles. . . . The church raised up the Paul of orthodoxy by using [pseudonymous] means. . . .
>
> The price the Apostle of the Gentiles had to pay to be allowed to remain in the church was the complete surrender of his personality and historical particularity. . . . Whenever the "church" becomes powerful, the bottom drops out from under him and he must immediately give way to the celebrities from the circle of the twelve apostles. . . . To some extent Paul becomes influential only as part of the holy scriptures acknowledged in the church—not the personality of the Apostle to the Gentiles

28. This is a rather ironic statement in Bauer regarding the church which otherwise exercised such authoritarian power!

> and his proclamation, but the *word* of Paul . . . whenever it is useful for the development and preservation of ecclesiastical teaching. . . . The introduction of the pastoral Epistles actually made the collection of Paul's letters ecclesiastically viable for the very first time (225–28 *passim*).

Paul seems to fare quite poorly in the hands of Bauer's early "orthodoxy." This is largely because of what Bauer perceives to be Paul's "as yet quite rudimentary organization of thought patterns" (234), but even more because of his plasticity and tolerance. Not only could he be used by so many diverse groups, he "scarcely knows what a heretic might be" (234). He knows that a lot of other Christians disagree with him—and that is fine with him. It is only the "most serious moral deviation" (235) that gets him upset. Even when he felt opposing positions to be "defective, he still did not detest and condemn them as heretical" (237).[29]

What we have known since the fourth century as "orthodoxy" was originally the dominant form of Christianity only in Rome. Through generous financial "gifts" and persuasive correspondence, "Rome confidently extends itself eastward, tries to break down resistance and stretches out a helping hand to those who are like-minded, drawing everything within reach into the well-knit structures of ecclesiastical organization" (231). Rome is thus the winner who vanquishes heresy by superior ability, backed by financial and political resources.

Bauer concludes by reflecting that "it is indeed a curious quirk of history that western Rome was destined to begin to exert the determinative influence upon a religion which had its cradle in the Orient, so as to give it that form in which it was to achieve worldwide recognition" (240). None of the heretical forms of Christianity, be they gnostic, Marcionite, or Montanist, "could have achieved such recognition" (240).

The essence, then, of Bauer's thesis is two-fold: in the beginning there were many varieties of Christianity (i.e., not a single, unified set of beliefs that later became what we know as "orthodoxy"), and second, it

29. In regard to passages that seem to contradict this portrait of Paul, Bauer adds a footnote: "The thrust of the polemic in Phil. 3 and in Rom. 16.17–20 is not entirely clear—or in any event, can be interpreted in different ways—and may be left aside at this point" (Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 236n11). In other words, he ignored what was not convenient for his theory! For a careful consideration of Paul's influence vis-à-vis Bauer, though in this case in the context of Philippi, see Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament,* 216–22. For Paul's influence on Polycarp, see Berding, *Polycarp and Paul*.

was the victory of one party, the church of Rome, which established the official dogma, suppressing all other competing views.[30]

Responses to Bauer

In an essay of this restricted length it is obviously impossible to respond fully to a substantial book like Bauer's. Rather I will summarize some of the key responses that have been posed in some detail by others, both as a direction for further reading and as a focused summary of the critical verdicts that have accumulated since *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* was first published in 1934.[31] In one sense, this survey of literature may seem rather tendentious or superfluous. It is justified, however, by the fact that contemporary scholars such as Ehrman seem to *assume* the validity of Bauer's general thesis.[32] For our purposes, the most significant critiques of Bauer, in historical order, include the following.[33]

30. See the similar summary in Ehrman, *Lost Christianities,* 176 (172–75 in greater detail); McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 119–20; and Bock, *Missing Gospels*, 49–50.

31. I give, for the most part, only the conclusions and do not attempt to detail all the supporting evidence in these critiques. Also note that I have included only reviews that are critical of some aspect of Bauer's thesis. Since I am persuaded that most of Bauer's work is misguided, and that the studies discussed here demonstrate that quite clearly, it is not necessary to list the areas in which I agree with his analysis or note other scholars who do the same. For an extended discussion of (largely positive) responses, see Georg Strecker's appendix in the English translation of Bauer (Strecker, "Reception of the Book"). These are, of course, only the earlier responses to the German edition. Most reviews have included positive elements of appreciation (see Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 33).

32. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 172–75.

33. For broad-ranging surveys of reviews published since 1934, see the articles by Harrington, "Reception," 289–98; Flora, "Critical Analysis," 37–88; and Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond," 65–82. For a review of earlier responses to the German edition, see Strecker, "Reception of the Book." Another work that is sometimes listed as a critique of Bauer is Hultgren's *Rise of Normative Christianity,* but though disagreeing with Bauer, it is not a particularly focused critique—and a number of Hultgren's proposals, building on Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, are themselves problematic. For a brief summary of Hultgren's approach, see Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 37.

Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (1954)

The first major critique of Bauer was H. E. W. Turner's *The Pattern of Christian Truth*[34]—the Bampton Lectures for 1954. The 500+ pages of this study offer Turner's "equivalent" of Bauer's work, but chapter two is an explicit critique of Bauer. His analysis follows Bauer's geographical outline. In regards to Edessa he concludes that "the evidence is too scanty and in many respects too flimsy to support any theory so trenchant and clear-cut as Bauer proposes" and "his skepticism on many points of detail appears excessive" (45). Turning to Egypt he proposes that there is more literary evidence than Bauer has acknowledged (some of it unknown in Bauer's day, but not all). "Most of the new discoveries have the effect of moving what we know of Alexandrine Christianity further to the right" (i.e., toward a more "orthodox" view). The greater probability is that the evidence Bauer examined is to be understood as representative of "splinter groups on the fringe of the Church" (57). All told, there is less evidence for Bauer's thesis from Alexandria than from Edessa (59). Likewise in Asia Minor there is nothing which "supports the more daring features of Bauer's reconstruction" (63). The picture Bauer draws of Corinth, Rome, and *1 Clement* "is at best non-proven" (67). As will others who follow, Turner charges Bauer with a "misuse of the argument from silence. If we have no evidence for the fact, we can hardly offer any profitable conjecture about its alleged cause" (67). Turner's final verdict is that Bauer's "fatal weakness appears to be a persistent tendency to over-simplify problems, combined with the ruthless treatment of such evidence as fails to support his case" (79).

Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Primitive Christianity" (1965)

Although basically in agreement with Bauer's approach, Hans Dieter Betz pointed out two significant problems. First, on Egypt, Bauer got it wrong: there was a strong gnostic presence, but that is not the only form of Christianity seen there. Second, he ignored the New Testament evidence; in particular, he "clearly underestimates Paul's fight against his opponents. Bauer overlooks the fact that Paul claims to be 'orthodox.' Wherever Paul

34. Turner, *Pattern of Christian Truth*.

argues in his letters, he does it to prove that his theological understanding is in accordance with the kerygma itself."[35]

Chapman, "Some Theological Reflections on Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*: A Review Article" (1970)

G. Clarke Chapman's review article was published prior to the release of the English translation of Bauer.[36] Chapman targets two major tactics: Bauer's numerous arguments from silence ("habitually sees many gaps in our records as significant or ominous"), and his "habitually coercing ambiguous pieces of evidence" to fit a preconceived theory (567). According to Chapman, Bauer is also overly skeptical of Eusebius and other Fathers who defend the traditional view, yet "gives immediate and weighty credence to the slightest reference by the church fathers to widespread or predominating heresy" (567).[37] Chapman also rejects Bauer's portrait of "power politics and sociological pressures" emanating from Rome, suggesting instead that we ought to consider the possibility that the victory of orthodoxy is related to providence: "certain broad lines of interpretation may have triumphed because of their theological adequacy" (572), though he realizes that "historians" have trouble dealing with such theological categories.

Flora, "A Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer's Theory of Early Christian Orthodoxy and Heresy" (1972)

One of the first full-length critics of Bauer from an American writer was the dissertation presented at The Southern Baptist Seminary in 1972 by Jerry Flora.[38] Flora leveled some stiff criticism against Bauer's thesis, which he viewed as a one-sided over-reaction to the traditional, Eusebian view of heresy. As a result, Flora argued that Bauer's conclusions need to be substantially modified (though not rejected out of hand).

35. Betz, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 306–8 (direct quote from 308).
36. Chapman, "Some Theological Reflections," 564–74.
37. Chapman later used the phrase "Eusebius demythologized" (ibid., 569).
38. Flora, "Critical Analysis of Walter Bauer's Theory."

There were four major criticisms. First, Bauer's view of Paul is misguided. Rather than a "tolerant" apostle who became "all things to all men" and "did not know what a heretic might be" (105), Paul claimed to be orthodox in contradistinction to others whom he pronounced quite decidedly to be wrong (106). "He plainly conceived himself to be an authorized apostle and his doctrine to be correct, as over against that of his unnamed opponents" (107). Second, Bauer was selective in the evidence cited and in the areas of the early church discussed: Edessa and Egypt are crucial, followed in importance by second-century Antioch and western Asia Minor. But, Flora asks, "what of the origin and development of Christianity in Judea (Jerusalem), in western Syria (Antioch), in Gaul (Lyons), in Africa (Carthage), and in Italy (Rome)? Here are other regions important to the life of the church by the close of the second century, but he did not analyze their origins, nor did he say why he chose not to" (113).[39] Though Bauer may have been able to offer a plausible argument for the priority of heresy in some areas, he conveniently ignored those areas not compatible with his thesis. Third, to argue that orthodoxy only gradually developed later after a long struggle with prior heresy is an over-simplified picture (115–24). Fourth, that Rome imposed its brand of Christianity on other churches assumes that the church in Rome was unified in the second century, but this flies in the face of the evidence for considerable diversity in Rome (125–30). Many of the early heretics were associated with Rome, including Simon Magus, Valentinus, Marcion, Apelles, Praxes, Theodotus, and Sabellius (131). "Prior to the time of Irenaeus and Victor, Rome was scarcely the juggernaut that Bauer described. It was a divided community, trying to find its way into an uncertain future. . . . The doctrine of Rome could not alone and automatically guarantee orthodoxy" (138).

Flora also develops an argument regarding the evidence for continuity between the first-century church, and particularly the apostolic church, and the second-century church:

> To maintain that orthodoxy was a late development which triumphed only with great difficulty seems to be saying too much. While it may have emerged *in strength* comparatively late and not without struggle, orthodoxy existed in continuity with the commitment and purpose of the first two generations of the

39. In the two overlaps in his lists (Antioch and Rome), Flora intends the second list to refer to the *origin* of these churches in the first century. Bauer discusses both cities/churches, but only in the second century and later.

> Christian movement. That apostolic witness with its historical perspective became the foundation on which Catholicism built and at the same time the stumbling block over which the heresies fell (149).

Heron, "The Interpretation of I Clement in Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*" (1973)

Rather than addressing the entire scope of Bauer's thesis, most subsequent studies have focused on individual aspects of it. One of the first of these was A. I. C. Heron's examination of Bauer's use of *1 Clement* within *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*.[40] A crucial aspect of Bauer's thesis is the influence of Rome—the early orthodox "power broker" who forced her way into a dominant position over weaker churches and alternate interpretations of Christianity. It is this argument that Heron examines in considerable detail. He acknowledges that it appears "extremely attractive" due especially to it being clear, direct, and comprehensive. But this attractiveness is itself problematic:

> Precisely because the whole interpretation is so plausible, one must immediately wonder whether its virtues of simplicity and comprehensiveness are to be attributed to Bauer's discovery of the real significance of the events and developments he describes, or whether rather they reflect a desire to impose on the complexity of history an over-simplified pattern. Is the plausibility and attractiveness of the whole theory based upon its coherence with the available evidence, or is it rather based upon the power of Bauer's synthesizing imagination?[41]

Heron will conclude that the latter is, unfortunately, the case. His first major criticism is that Bauer's interpretation of *1 Clement* is *not* based on *1 Clement*. It is based, rather, on evidence drawn from elsewhere and from attempting to read between the lines in *1 Clement*, assuming that the letter itself is in part designed to hide Rome's true message and motive (526). "He has explained—indeed, explained away—all those elements in I Clement which might seem to weigh against his interpretation, which

40. Heron, "Interpretation of I Clement," 517–45.

41. Ibid., 525.

he opposes to the meaning which Clement prefers to suggest" (i.e., what a plain reading of the text of *1 Clement* itself would seem to say).

In more specific terms, Heron argues that there is no evidence that Rome succeeded in imposing a monarchical bishop on Corinth, nor that they bribed the leaders of the opposition in Corinth. Even more seriously, Bauer's assumption that Rome's motive is not love and concern (as *1 Clement* seems to suggest), but a power move to extend orthodoxy is unsupported; Bauer can only adduce this by reading back evidence from a century or more later (529–30). Nor will Bauer's hypothesis stand that the real issue in Corinth is that of an "orthodox" minority being ousted by a gnosticizing majority. Although an appealing and plausible suggestion, "the evidence which is given to show that it is in fact what *did* happen is remarkably tenuous, and is drawn almost exclusively not only from evidence other than that of I Clement, but from evidence which relates to events and developments which all took place in places or at times more or less remote from Corinth 95–96" (530). Bauer's suggestions that second-century writers who refer to *1 Clement* understand that letter to relate to the question of "orthodoxy" versus "heresy" is likewise "exceedingly doubtful" (536; see 533–36).

Heron concludes that,

> Bauer's whole interpretation of I Clement is . . . rather less satisfactorily buttressed by convincing evidence than one might wish. . . . It need hardly be said that when all the components of an argument are as weak as those we have to deal with here, the argument as a whole, however plausible or attractive in itself it may appear, cannot be taken very seriously. . . .
>
> . . . The theory as a whole indeed depends more on his powers of imagination than on the facts available to us.[42]

After then devoting the following eight pages to a positive study of the relevant issues in *1 Clement*, Heron reiterates that "attractive, and in itself plausible as [Bauer's] interpretation of I Clement is, it cannot be regarded as anything more than an interesting but improbable speculation" (545).

42. Ibid., 536–37.

Norris, "Ignatius, Polycarp, and I Clement: Walter Bauer Reconsidered" (1976)

Although Frederick Norris accepts Bauer's negative thesis (his critique of the traditional, orthodox theory of the origin of heresy), he argues that Bauer's positive theses are not defensible; that is, his reconstruction of how things *did* happen in the second century. Bauer's explanations of the events related to Ignatius, Polycarp, and *1 Clement* are invalid. Much of this failure is Bauer's frequent argument from silence, but

> his basic error is in reading history backwards, either by demanding that the fullest or even 'ideal' stage of a development must be present at its beginning in order for it to exist, or by imposing later events on earlier ones to support his interpretations. Frankly, he misreads the texts. One should be cautious in following his lead in places where there are few texts and much silence, when it can be demonstrated that he does not proceed on good grounds with the existent texts.[43]

Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Egypt* (1977)

One of the most detailed studies of Egyptian Christianity, particularly the strange silence regarding it prior to AD 200, is Colin H. Roberts's *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*.[44] His purpose is not primarily a critique of Bauer; that is a secondary outcome in the second half of the book. In contrast to Bauer's query as to where the evidence is for orthodoxy in the second century, Roberts asks why there is no trace of *either* orthodoxy *or* heresy; there are hardly any traces of Christianity in any form. But there is some and Roberts proceeds to sort through the available evidence, beginning with the papyri and evidence within various documents (such as *nomina sacra*). His conclusion is that the silence has little to do with the prevalence of Gnosticism, but rather that Egyptian (and in particular Alexandrian) Christianity originally remained more tightly connected to the Jewish community in Alexandria than it had in other parts of the empire, and apparently on better terms with their

43. Norris, "Ignatius, Polycarp, and I Clement," 43.

44. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief*.

non-Christian Jewish neighbors. Few Gentiles apparently became part of the church there, so it retained a strongly Jewish flavor, even after AD 70. Only when the Jewish community in Egypt was nearly exterminated during the Jewish revolt there (AD 115–117) does Christianity begin to evidence itself distinctly.

> We may surmise that for much of the second century it was a church with no strong central authority and little organization; one of the directions in which it developed was certainly Gnosticism, but a Gnosticism not initially separated from the rest of the Church. It was the teaching and personality of the two Gnostic leaders, Basilides and Valentinius, that impressed the Christian world outside Egypt and were remembered, but this is not the whole story. . . . [eventually] the line between Gnostic and Catholic Christianity was more sharply drawn; but in Egypt, as can be seen in Clement and Origen, the process was slow and distinctions sometimes remained blurred.[45]

McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians" (1979)

Related to Roberts's study of Egyptian Christianity, James McCue, in his article "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," debated Bauer's handling of the Valentinian gnostic data.[46] He argues that "Bauer is simply wrong" (119) since he overlooks three key points regarding Valentinianism:

> 1) The orthodox play a role in Valentinian thought such that they seem to be part of the Valentinian self-understanding. 2) This reference often suggests that the orthodox are the main body, and at several points explicitly and clearly identifies the orthodox as the many over against the small number of Valentinians. 3) The Valentinians of the decades prior to Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria use the books of the orthodox New Testament in a manner that is best accounted for by supposing that Valentinianism developed within a mid-second century matrix (120).

45. Ibid., 71–72. The description of the church there as de-centralized and less organized can be confirmed and documented in some detail from Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity,* 18–20, who depends on Jakab, *Ecclesia Alexandria,* 176–77.

46. McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy," 118–30.

McCue's subsequent discussion documents these three points from the Valentinians' own statements. Points one and two, in particular, validate Edwin Yamauchi's claim that "Gnosticism always appears as a parasite. . . . 'it is always built on earlier, pre-existing religions or on their traditions.'"[47]

Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined* (1988)

By far the most detailed analysis of Bauer's work is Thomas A. Robinson's *The Bauer Thesis Examined*.[48] This carefully argued work proposes that "Bauer's understanding of orthodoxy and heresy does not provide the kind of insight into the character of earliest Christianity that is widely attributed to it" (27). In contrast to Bauer's thesis that heresy was early and dominant, Robinson concludes that "it is the catholic community, not the gnostic, that represents the character of the majority in western Asia Minor in the early period" (203). To support this conclusion, he first sketches the history of the debate (chap. 1). Robinson addresses one of the unique features of Bauer's approach: the geographical treatment of the question of heresy in the early church. Bauer's choice to begin with Edessa was deliberate since there he could make his strongest case. Robinson evaluates the evidence available from various areas, concluding that only Asia Minor can form an adequate basis for evaluating the orthodoxy-heresy debate—"no other area is remotely comparable" (41). The criteria for this judgment is two-fold: extensive literature, including literature that addresses the question of heresy. On this basis Bauer is faulted for placing the greatest weight on two areas, Edessa and Egypt, that have neither feature—the evidence there is scanty and ambiguous, to say nothing of the fact that neither was a primary center of the early church (42). The other potential areas (Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, and Rome) are not satisfactory either.[49]

47. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 185, citing in part, Drijvers, "Origins of Gnosticism," 331.

48. Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*; originally, Robinson, "Orthodoxy and Heresy."

49. Edessa, in particular, is problematic in that "our information is too ambiguous or mute to allow us confident reconstructions of Christianity in this area" (Robinson, *Bauer Thesis Examined*, 58). Egypt, likewise: "the scarcity of the materials from Egypt results in suspicious gaps in the logic of these various reconstructions" (64). Corinth may sound more promising, but beyond 1 and 2 Corinthians, we have only

Robinson then turns to the one area which provides the primary data unavailable elsewhere—Asia Minor. After examining the importance and character of Ephesus and western Asia Minor (chap. 3), he turns to a detailed evaluation of Bauer (chaps. 4 and 5). "Bauer's detective work—never dull, sometimes ingenious, occasionally brilliant—suffers from defects more serious than the sporadic overstatements and tendentious claims . . . . Far more fundamental and less easily corrigible, the defects of Bauer's argument are structural" (129). These structural defects include: "(1) the hypothetical alliance of 'ecclesiastically oriented' Paulinists with Palestinian immigrants against Gnosticizing Paulinists; (2) the alleged strength of heresy in the area; and (3) the proposed cause for the rise of the monarchical episcopate (129–30)."

The final verdict is that,

> Bauer's reconstruction of the history of the early church in western Asia Minor is faulty—not just in minor details—but at critical junctures. For one thing, the thesis does not adequately explain the alliance between Palestinian immigrants and anti-gnostic Paulinists; for another, it does not recognize the early consciousness of orthodoxy that might be indicated by such a shift. Further, it has failed to explain how a browbeaten orthodox minority could have so radically altered the structure of power in their favour. Finally, and most significantly, it has not demonstrated that heresy was as widespread and strong as Bauer had contended. In light of these weaknesses, Bauer's reconstruction of primitive Christianity in western Asia Minor must, to a large measure, be set aside.
>
> But the setting aside of Bauer's reconstruction of the early church in western Asia Minor points to something more seriously flawed about the Bauer Thesis. The failure of the Bauer Thesis in western Asia Minor is not merely one flaw in an otherwise coherent reconstruction. The failure of the thesis in the only area where it can be adequately tested casts suspicion on the other areas of Bauer's investigation. Extreme caution should be exercised in granting to the Bauer Thesis insight into those areas for which

one document for late first and early second century: *1 Clement*, which is "a less detailed and considerably more ambiguous momentary glimpse of that church from a person who seems not to have had first-hand acquaintance with the church there. That makes for inventive, untestable, and not necessarily accurate hypotheses" (77). Rome is unfruitful since we have too little information to determine the original form of Christianity there (81), and the literary evidence is meager as it relates to Rome itself and none of it addresses the question of heresy (81–84). We have no literary evidence for either Jerusalem or Antioch in the relevant period (84–87, 88–91).

> inventive theses appear credible only because evidence is either too scarce or too mute to put anything to the test (204).

Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of Αἵρεσις in the Early Christian Era" (1991)

A helpful, synthetic response to Bauer's work is Michel Desjardins's article, "Bauer and Beyond."[50] Much of the article consists of digesting and evaluating the work of others, but in so doing he synthesizes these other studies in a helpful way. He approves Robinson's arguments "on the whole" as being "well-taken and well-argued," concluding that Robinson has added "another row of nails to the coffin enclosing Bauer's thesis."[51] Desjardins's primary contribution relates to the meaning of αἵρεσις. He suggests that Bauer has asked the wrong question. Instead of asking whether orthodoxy or heresy came first (Bauer's question), one should ask "what αἵρεσις actually meant for first and second-century writers."[52] He seems to endorse Cohen's suggestion that heresy was not a category invented by early orthodoxy as Bauer assumes, but arises from the church's Jewish heritage, reflecting similar categories as the rabbis. The "common use of scripture and belief in one God possibly led [the Jewish rabbis and the early church] independently to notions of unity, oneness, and exclusivity."[53] This has obvious implications in support of a more traditional view in which "orthodoxy" is original and "heresy" later and derivative.

Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (2004)

Although not formally a critique of Bauer's work, Birger A. Pearson's study examines in considerable detail one of the key geographical areas on which Bauer's thesis is founded. I do not accept some of Pearson's dates or interpretations, but he has provided a very helpful survey of the

50. Desjardins, "Bauer and Beyond," 65–82.
51. Ibid., 72.
52. Ibid., 72; see also 78.
53. Ibid., 77.

documentary evidence for Christianity in second- and third-century Egypt. He clearly demonstrates that there was diversity present, yet he rejects Bauer's explanation that heresy was original and dominant. He cites in particular *The Preaching of Peter,* an early second-century pseudepigraphal writing that reflects traditional, "orthodox" Christianity. Since this is the earliest such documentary evidence available, it carries considerable weight in the discussion. Pearson comments that "Bauer ignores this important work, which would have been detrimental to his theory."[54]

Davidson, *The Birth of the Church* (2004)

A more recent critique of Bauer comes in Ivor J. Davidson's history of the early church. He concludes that Bauer has ignored the evidence of theological diversity with the Roman church itself, and that Rome's "political" influence over other churches only developed slowly; they were surely not in a position to repress their peers when Christianity was still an illegal religion (as it was until the fourth century). Nor does Bauer give sufficient credit to the influence of the Jerusalem church as the "mother church" which specified key matters of doctrine and practice (158).

> Above all, however, Bauer's theory overlooks the degree to which there clearly was from the beginning a certain set of convictions about Jesus that bound a majority of believers together, and it underestimates the intrinsic impetus that existed within these convictions to work out the logical parameters within which the gospel and its advocates could be said to exist. The process of discerning truth and falsehood that evolved in the late first and second centuries was implicitly grounded in the attempts by the first followers of Jesus to think through the consequences of their newfound faith with regard to personal salvation and practical living.[55]

54. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity,* 16n18. This work is described as lying "on a trajectory leading to the mainline Christianity of Clement" (16; see also 44).

55. Davidson, *Birth of the Church*, 158.

Trebilco, "Christian Communities in Western Asia Minor into the Early Second Century: Ignatius and Others as Witnesses against Bauer" (2006)

One of the plenary addresses at the 2005 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society directly addressed a key portion of Bauer's arguments.[56] Paul Trebilco made four points regarding Bauer's use of the Ignatian evidence with regard to Asia Minor. 1) The evidence shows that the earliest form of Christianity in western Asia Minor was orthodox and that the heresies that Ignatius opposed were later, derivative forms, especially in regard to Docetism. 2) Bauer's inference (based on Ignatius and John *not* writing a letter to them) that Colossae and Hieropolis were heretical churches is ill-founded; several other explanations are much more probable than Bauer's argument from silence. 3) Bauer's contention that disagreement with the bishop was evidence of theological differences (i.e., heresy) is overstated; many of the differences that Ignatius discusses were organizational and structural. And 4) contrary to Bauer's conclusion that any Pauline memory or influence has been completely lost in Ephesus (because the church there had been heretical for so long), there is evidence of Pauline influence in western Asia Minor at the time of Ignatius.

Trebilco has some specific comments regarding the existence of "orthodoxy" in the geographical area covered by his study. "So in the literature from Western Asia Minor we find a strong sense of applying criteria by which to judge whether, in the opinion of the author and his community, a certain belief or practice is in keeping with the tradition. This trend is consonant with the sense of "the tradition," "sound teaching," or "the truth" that we find in these documents" (42). "Thus the roots of later 'orthodoxy' are to be found here. 'Orthodoxy' is not to be seen as a later victory by those in power, or something determined by politics. It goes back to and is an organic development from the much earlier period. . . . [There is] a strong sense of doctrinal self-consciousness on the part of the canonical authors. . . . This sense of a limit, self-consciously adopted, is a very significant feature of Western Asia Minor" (43).

The conclusion of Trebilco's article is that "Bauer's thesis does not stand up to scrutiny with regard to the situation in Western Asia Minor. Where we can investigate the matter, what Bauer calls 'heresy' is neither the earliest form of Christian faith, nor is it in the majority" (43).

56. Trebilco, "Christian Communities," 17–44.

Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (2010)

A recent critique of the Bauer Thesis appears in Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*. If Thomas Robinson's work solidified the label of the Bauer Thesis in the secondary literature, Köstenberger and Kruger have contributed the compounded tag of the "Bauer-Ehrman Thesis." Although a critique of the "Bauer-Ehrman Thesis" was "not the main purpose" of the book (233), the topic fills up the initial one hundred pages, as the entire first section of the book examines the "Bauer-Ehrman Thesis" in some detail. Köstenberger and Kruger explain,

> In chapter 1, we will look at the origin and influence of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis, including its appropriation and critique by others. Chapter 2 examines Bauer's geographical argument for the precedence of early diversity in the Christian movement and considers patristic evidence for early orthodoxy and heresy, and chapter 3 turns to an area of investigation that Bauer surprisingly neglected—the New Testament data itself. How diverse was early Christianity, and did heresy in fact precede orthodoxy? These are the questions that will occupy us in the first part of the book as we explore the larger paradigmatic questions raised by the Bauer-Ehrman proposal (17).[57]

In chapter one, Köstenberger and Kruger argue, "One main reason for Bauer's surprising impact is that his views have found a fertile soil in the contemporary cultural climate" (23). The authors highlight the postmodern context, which praises subjective experience, diversity, pluralism, and an inclusivity that repudiates exclusive truth claims as ideological power ploys.[58] Therefore, "Bauer's thesis has received a new lease

57. Part 2 applies their insights to "Picking the Books: Tracing the Development of the New Testament Canon." And Part 3 examines "Changing the Story: Manuscripts, Scribes, and Textual Transmission." For Michael Kruger's further canonical studies, see Kruger, *Canon Revisited*; and Kruger, *Question of Canon*.

58. "And thus the tables are turned—diversity becomes the last remaining orthodoxy, and orthodoxy becomes heresy, because it violates the new orthodoxy: the gospel of diversity" (Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 234); cf. Blaising, "Faithfulness."

on life through the emergence of postmodernism, the belief that truth is inherently subjective and a function of power" (39).

The opening chapter also summarizes early critiques found in initial reviews of Bauer's work:[59]

> First, Bauer's conclusions were unduly conjectural in light of the limited nature of the available evidence and in some cases arguments from silence altogether.
>
> Second, Bauer unduly neglected the New Testament evidence and anachronistically used second-century data to describe the nature of "earliest" (first-century) Christianity. . . .
>
> Third, Bauer grossly oversimplified the first-century picture, which was considerably more complex than Bauer's portrayal suggested. . . .
>
> Fourth, Bauer neglected existing theological standards in the early church.

The first chapter also reviews the "later critiques" of Turner, Marshall, Martin, McCue, Robinson, and Hultgren (33–38).

Chapter two retraces Bauer's steps by investigating the rise of Christianity in various locales, arguing that the earliest Christianity in these places was orthodox in form rather than heretical. The authors survey the evidence available for (1) Asia Minor, (2) Alexandria, (3) Edessa, and (4) Rome.[60] Köstenberger and Kruger conclude that "in all the major urban centers investigated by Bauer, orthodoxy most likely preceded heresy or the second-century data by itself is inconclusive" (52). The second chapter further argues that apostolic Christianity was more unified than many scholars allow and that Gnosticism was less organized than many acknowledge (59–60). "In light of the available first-century evidence, any assessment that concludes that Gnosticism was organized earlier than the second century is ultimately an argument from silence" (61).

Chapter three of *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* focuses upon materials in the New Testament. As others have done, Köstenberger and Kruger note the irony of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* not actually examining *earliest* Christianity.[61] "This explains, at least in part, why Bauer found early Christianity to be diverse and orthodoxy late—

59. They also acknowledged that "most reviews were appreciative" to varying degrees (Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 33).

60. Bauer also focused investigations upon Antioch, Macedonia, and Cyprus.

61. A similar point is made in Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity."

he failed to consult the New Testament message regarding Jesus and his apostles" (69). Köstenberger and Kruger distinguish between "legitimate diversity" (which they find in the New Testament) and "illegitimate diversity, striking at the core of the earliest Christological affirmations" (100). "Bauer and his followers also fail to do justice to the massive Old Testament substructure of New Testament theology and vastly underestimate the pivotal significance of Jesus (who was both the primary subject and object of the gospel message) in linking Old Testament messianic prophecy organically with the gospel of the early Christians" (100–101).

Conclusion

Following his own survey of previous studies, Daniel Harrington concludes that "Bauer's reconstruction of how orthodoxy triumphed remains questionable."[62] It would seem that a stronger statement is justified. Larry Hurtado's judgment is correct:

> Over the years . . . important studies have rather consistently found Bauer's thesis seriously incorrect. . . . In fact, about all that remains unrefuted of Bauer's argument is the observation, and a rather banal one at that, that earliest Christianity was characterized by diversity, including serious differences of belief. Those who laud Bauer's book, however, obviously prefer to proceed as if much more of his thesis is sustainable. Unfortunately, for this preference, Bauer's claims have not stood well the test of time and critical examination.[63]

Or, as Darrell Bock asks, "if the two central Bauerian positions are flawed [diverse origins and Roman influence], why does the overall thesis stand?"[64] We might rather conclude with Hans-Dietrich Altendorf that Bauer has posed, at times, a "konstruktive Phantasie" or an "elegant ausgearbeitete Fiktion."[65] Nevertheless, this "constructive" and "elegantly

62. Harrington, "Reception," 297–98.

63. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 520–21.

64. Bock, *Missing Gospels,* 47.

65. "A constructive fantasy" and "an elegantly assembled fiction" (Altendorf, "Zum Stichwort," 64, cited by Bock, *Missing Gospels,* 50). Altendorf's article has not been accessible to me; according to Bock, the first description relates to Bauer's arguments from silence, and the second refers to his view of the Roman church's relation to Corinth in *1 Clement*.

assembled" work of scholarly speculation continues to wield substantial (though disputed) sway over the discipline.[66]

66. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 13 (2009) 30–63. It has been adapted and updated here.