Introduction

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Walter Bauer (1877–1960) was an influential German professor, a skilled linguist of classical languages, a biblical commentator, and a historian of early Christianity.[1] He enjoyed a prolonged academic career at the universities of Marburg, Strasburg, and Berlin. Theological students around the world still acknowledge the enduring standard of his lexical work, now known (in the most recent edition) as "BDAG," the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.[2]

Bauer's major work that re-oriented the underlying foundations of New Testament scholarship, however, was his 1934 study entitled *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (second German edition, 1964).[3] This year (2014) marks the golden anniversary (semi-centennial) of the second German edition and the eightieth anniversary of the first German edition. The 1971 Fortress edition of *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* catapulted his influence upon English scholarship. As a testament to its enduring importance, Bauer's volume is still readily available in print in French as well as in English.[4]

1. See Fascher, "Walter Bauer als Kommentator"; Gingrich, "Walter Bauer"; Schneemelcher, "Walter Bauer als Kirchenhistoriker"; Strecker, "Walter Bauer"; Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, 451–55.

2. See Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, 415–17.

3. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei*; Bauer and Strecker, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei*.

4. Bauer, *Orthodoxie et hérésie*; Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.

Bauer's work questioned basic assumptions of New Testament and early Christian scholarship. He specifically challenged the traditional view of Christian origins, which privileged the primacy of "orthodoxy."[5] He argued: 1) In many geographical regions, what came to be deemed as "heresy" was the original form of Christianity. 2) In many locales, the "heretical" adherents often outnumbered the "orthodox" adherents. 3) As one form of Christianity among many, "orthodoxy" suppressed "heretical" competitors, often through ecclesiastical machinations and coercive tactics, and especially through the powerful influence of the Roman church. 4) The "orthodox" parties then revised the church's collective memory by claiming that their views had always been the accepted norm. Hans Lietzmann praised the final product as "A splendid book . . . a frontal attack on the usual approach to church history, vigorously carried out with solid erudition, penetrating criticism, and balanced organization."[6]

Although first published eighty years ago, and although criticized in specific details, the *general* thrust of the Bauer Thesis enormously influences early Christian studies even in the present.[7] Bart Ehrman has called Bauer's study "the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century"[8] and "possibly the most significant book on early Christianity written in modern times."[9] Bauer's work widened the horizons of New Testament scholarship by bringing the question of "unity and diversity" to the forefront.[10] Prodigées of the

5. As Bart Ehrman explains regarding Bauer's employment of "orthodoxy" and "heresy," "He uses the terms descriptively to refer to social groups, namely, the party that eventually established dominance over the rest of Christendom (orthodoxy) and the individuals and groups that expressed alternative theological views (heresies). In doing so, he implies no value judgment (one group was right, the others were wrong) and does not embrace the traditional notion that one of the groups (orthodoxy) could claim historical priority and numerical superiority over the others" (Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 8). Thus "heretical" simply refers to "forms subsequently condemned by the victorious party" (ibid.). Ehrman agrees that "the labels *can* retain their usefulness as descriptions of social and political realities, quite apart from their theological connotations" (ibid., 13).

6. As found in Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 287.

7. Besides the famous names that follow in the paragraph above, see also Dart, *Jesus of Heresy and History*; Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*.

8. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 173.

9. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 7.

10. See Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*; Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament"; Smalley, "Diversity and Development in John"; Martin, "Some Reflections"; Köstenberger," "Diversity and Unity."

Bauer Thesis (in revised forms) include such famous and accomplished scholars as Karen King (Harvard University), Helmut Koester (Harvard University), Gerd Lüdemann (University of Göttingen), Elaine Pagels (Princeton University), James Robinson (Claremont Graduate University), and the late Marvin Meyer (Chapman University).[11] Perhaps the most celebrated contemporary disseminator of Bauer's basic approach is Bart Ehrman, a prolific author who has written or edited around thirty volumes, including four books on the *New York Times* bestseller list.[12]

These scholars, following in the footsteps of Bauer, emphasize the diversity of "early Christianities,"[13] sometimes denying any theological strand or core that could claim normative continuity with apostolic tradition. As a result, substantially diverse movements become more or less equally valid forms of Christianity, and ancient "heresies" can be recovered as rehabilitated "lost Christianities."[14] The Bauer Thesis has become "the now-familiar story of the tremendous diversity of early Christianity and its eventual suppression by a powerful 'proto-orthodox' faction."[15] As Ehrman explains, the group eventually tagged as "orthodox," which possessed "a kind of spirited intolerance of contrary views," achieved social dominance through such power ploys as "social ostracism, economic pressures, and political machinations."[16] "Only when one social group had exerted itself sufficiently over the rest of Christendom did a 'majority' opinion emerge; only then did the 'right belief' represent the view

11. For the intervening period between Bauer and these contemporaries, Köstenberger and Kruger highlight the work of Rudolf Bultmann (Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 27–28).

12. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*; Ehrman, *God's Problem*; Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*; and Ehrman, *Forged*. One would imagine that Ehrman's recently published *How Jesus Became God* will enjoy similar popularity.

13. "Evidence for this view has been steadily mounting throughout the present century: we know of the widespread diversity of early Christianity from both primary and secondary accounts, and can sometimes pinpoint this diversity with considerable accuracy" (Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 4).

14. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

15. See Koester, "Gnomai Diaphoroi." Cf. Henry, "Why is Contemporary Scholarship So Enamored of Ancient Heresies?"

16. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, 13, 17. "Looked at in sociohistorical terms, orthodoxy and heresy are concerned as much with struggles over power as with debates over ideas" (ibid., 14).

of the Christian church at large."[17] But this was due to "the 'accident' of their preservation."[18]

The last eighty years have proven that the Bauer Thesis was a bold, provocative understanding of Christian origins. On the one hand, even Bauer's critics acknowledge his fascinating suggestions and erudite contentions, as well as his dismantling of simplistic, ahistorical views of "monolithic dogma." By examining data from specific geographical locations with careful attention to localized details, he rightfully persuaded other scholars to mistrust sweeping generalizations.[19] He motivated theologians to consider the role of sociological and political forces within theological debates. Furthermore, he helped to renew interest in forgotten movements that had been swept away by history. On the other hand, Bauer overlooked, ignored, or manipulated historical data, and he often resorted to unfounded conjectures, special pleading, or arguments from silence.

On any view, the Bauer Thesis has greatly influenced New Testament studies, although his original work purposely targeted only second- and third-century Christianity. In this sense, the word *earliest* in the title of his work (*Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*) can be a misleading descriptor.[20] Ironically, Bauer dismissed the New Testament as "both too unproductive and too much disputed to be able to serve as a point of departure."[21] Most critical assessments of Bauer's work, however, have come from the pens of New Testament scholars, even to this day (most recently, Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 2010).

The reconstruction of equally valid forms of Christianity without a normative center continues to be a "live" topic. The present volume forms a unique contribution through its comprehensive analysis, including critical evaluations by a range of New Testament and especially Patristic scholars. The Patristic focus reflects the second- and third-century emphasis of Bauer himself. Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach guarantees that the compilation will be a valuable resource in both the New Testament and Patristic fields. The essayists have re-examined the Bauer Thesis by taking a fresh look at orthodoxy and heresy, unity and

17. Ibid., 8.

18. Ibid.

19. See Gero, "With Walter Bauer on the Tigris."

20. Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity"; Staten, "Was There Unity in the Sub-Apostolic Church?"

21. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, xxv.

diversity, theology and ideology, and rhetoric and polemic within early Christian contexts. They have updated the discussion through investigations of post-Bauer evidence concerning Gnosticism and Jewish Christianity, and they have examined a region of early Christianity completely overlooked by Bauer—the North African churches. All contributors have authored previous publications in their respective topics.

These focused essays, supplemented by post-Bauer discoveries and refined by post-Bauer scholarship, reveal new insights through careful attention to historical detail and geographical particularity, even as Bauer himself demanded.[22] Although recognizing the importance of Bauer's innovative methodologies, fruitful suggestions, and legitimate criticisms of traditional views, the contributors also expose Bauer's numerous claims that fall short of the historical evidence. The contributors' desire is that this fresh examination of Bauer's paradigm may serve as a launching point to a richer and deeper understanding of the unity and diversity (and even normativity) found in the variegated early Christian movement.

22. The majority of these essays were presented at an invited session of the Patristics and Medieval History Section of the Evangelical Theological Society. As chairperson of the section, I was tasked with editing this volume. As always, the particular views expressed remain those of each individual contributor alone.