

INTERACTIVE DIVERSITY: A PROPOSED MODEL OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Abstract

Although the ‘trajectories’ model of early Christian developments introduced by James Robinson and Helmut Koester has been influential in some circles, and particularly emphasizes diversity in early Christianity, the image of a trajectory may oversimplify matters and may in some cases impose an artificial connection of texts and phenomena. The undeniable diversity of early Christianity also involved a rich and varied interaction and a complexity that is not adequately captured in a ‘trajectory’ approach. A model of ‘interactive diversity’ more adequately reflects the complex nature of early Christianity.

The earliest model of Christian origins appears in certain ancient church fathers, who posited an initial and unified form of Christianity from which a subsequent diversity then flowed, including alleged heretical divergences from the putatively original form. We may take a statement attributed to Hegesippus (ca. 100-180 CE) as a prime example:

But when the sacred band of the Apostles and the generation of those to whom it had been vouchsafed to hear with their own ears the divine wisdom had reached the several ends of their lives, then the federation of godless error took its beginning through the deceit of false teachers who, seeing that none of the Apostles still remained, barefacedly tried against the preaching of the truth the counter-proclamation of ‘knowledge falsely so-called.’¹

Reacting against this obviously simplistic view, and building on earlier work, especially Walter Bauer’s *Heresy and Orthodoxy in Early Christianity*, several decades ago James Robinson and Helmut Koester proposed a ‘trajectories’ model of early Christian developments. In this proposal, there were multiple versions of the Christian movement from the outset, which (and this is the key claim) could be traced diachronically, each of them generating a distinguishable ‘trajectory’ through early Christianity.²

¹ Attributed to Hegesippus in Eusebius, *HE* 3.32.8; translation from Kirsopp Lake, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), vol. 1, p. 277. Irenaeus expressed a similar view in *AdvHaer* 3.3.4.

² James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, hereafter *Trajectories*), esp. pp. 8-19, where Robinson sketches the features of a ‘trajectories’ model. He acknowledges (p. 16) as influential on the model the ‘epochal work’ by Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1934); ET: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) cited here, translated from the 2nd

This trajectories model has been widely noted, and adopted enthusiastically by some who have presupposed it as a basis for placing various texts in a diachronic map of developments in early Christianity.³ Perhaps part of the reason for the salience of the Robinson/Koester trajectories model is that there have been few rival-theories of comparable breadth of scope.⁴ Indeed, scholars in Christian Origins rarely seem to attempt to produce such a macro-model, instead more typically focusing on particular texts, figures, ideas and developments.⁵ There are some serious problems with the trajectories model, however, and so in this essay I will offer another model that I will call ‘Interactive Diversity’. But, in justification for considering my proposal, let us first note some shortcomings with the ‘trajectories’ approach.

German edition 1964. Over against what he called ‘the ecclesiastical position’ of an initially unified gospel that became diversified at a secondary stage, Bauer argued that in several geographical areas theologies later labelled ‘heresy’ were as early as, or earlier than, what came to be ‘orthodox’ teaching e.g., p. xxiii). Despite endorsement by Robinson and Koester (and others), however, the specifics of Bauer’s case actually have not stood up well in subsequent testing. Among particularly important critiques, note the following: Thomas A. Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988); Daniel J. Harrington, ‘The Reception of Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* During the Last Decade,’ *HTR* 73 (1980), pp. 289-98; Michel Desjardins, ‘Bauer and Beyond: On Recent Scholarly Discussions of *Hairesis* in the Early Christian Era,’ *SC* 8 (1991), pp. 65-82. On Bauer’s view of earliest Christianity in Egypt, see, e.g., the balanced critique by Birger A. Pearson, ‘Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism in Alexandria,’ in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 455-66 (this volume hereafter cited as *The Future of Early Christianity*).

³ E.g., Jonathan Schwiebert, *Knowledge and the Coming Kingdom: The Didache’s Mal Ritual and its Place in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), invokes a ‘research model that envisions trajectories through early Christianity,’ explicitly acknowledging derivation of it from Robinson and Koester (pp. 2-3).

⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), granted that the trajectories approach was ‘among the most stimulating of our time for research into Christian origins,’ but also criticized Robinson and Koester for attributing to putatively earlier stages of a given trajectory the characteristics of texts that supposedly represent its later stages, judging this ‘a questionable method’ (pp. 15-18, esp. pp. 17-18). Hultgren did not really offer a rival model, but instead argued that one can see the beginnings of a ‘normative tradition’ in the earliest Christian texts. My own stance here is distinguishable from his in that I more readily grant genuine diversity in early Christianity. The musings of Burton L. Mack, ‘On Redescribing Christian Origins,’ *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996), pp. 247-69, aside from involving a good many question-begging statements, do not really comprise a developed model.

⁵ April D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), advocated a ‘Traditio-rhetorical model’ by which to understand the production and nature of early Christian texts (esp. pp. 20-23). She refers to ‘the Interpretative Trajectory’, by which, however, she seems to mean an author’s reinterpretation of the discourse and issues under discussion at a given ‘point of discourse’. It appears, thus, that in her usage a ‘trajectory’ is simply the direction of thought/discourse taken by a given author and in a given text (e.g., the Gospel of John, pp. 109-32). This is a very different use of ‘trajectory’ from that which I address in this essay, which involves connecting two or more texts in a line of development.

Problems with Trajectories

We may begin with a major conceptual inadequacy. The trajectories model appears to suggest discrete types of originating early Christianity, which then developed somewhat independently, the subsequent developments of each version pictured as mainly driven by factors internal to it.⁶ A ‘trajectory’, after all, refers to the predictable flight-path of some object such as a cannon-round, an arrow, or a ball. The path of such an object is certainly affected by gravity, and may also be affected by certain circumstantial factors, such as wind, but its flight is essentially a result of initial factors of force and direction when it is fired or flung. In short, the metaphor of a trajectory applied to early Christianity can suggest (and may presuppose) a somewhat similar uni-linear development, over-simplifying matters.

Indeed, as we can see in the examples I will cite, often in the trajectories model each version of Christianity seems to be pictured as following its own path, heavily determined by factors internal to it, and maintaining a somewhat discrete character over against other versions. To be sure, it does appear that there were some developments that we think we can link in a relatively discrete path. To cite perhaps the most widely accepted example, most scholars judge the Pauline Corpus to include posthumous writings that reflect a Pauline tradition in which the figure of Paul and his emphases underwent subsequent developments. But, notwithstanding a few such examples of relatively more direct lines of development, I contend that, more generally, early Christianity was a far more complex phenomenon than is represented in a trajectories model, and so we require a more adequate conceptual scheme.

As an illustration of how the trajectories model may reflect, or perhaps even lead to, over-simplification of matters, consider James Robinson’s positing ‘a gnosticizing trajectory,’ a path supposedly followed from what he termed the ‘proto-Gnosticism of Qumran through intermediate stages attested both in the New Testament and in part of Nag Hammadi into the full gnostic systems of the second century A.D.,’ ‘the Johannine trajectory’ portrayed as part of this larger trajectory as well.⁷ In this and some other

⁶ For examples of this, in addition to the essays by Robinson and Koester gathered in *Trajectories*, see the retrospective review of scholarly developments by Robinson, ‘The Q Trajectory: Between John and Matthew via Jesus,’ in *The Future of Early Christianity*, pp. 173-94.

⁷ James M. Robinson, ‘The Johannine Trajectory,’ in *Trajectories*, pp. 232-68, citing p. 266.

cases, however, it seems to me that only by interpreting earlier texts (e.g., Qumran) too much in terms of later ones (the ‘gnosticizing’ Christian texts of the second century and later) can one impose such a dubious (artificial?) connection. This grand ‘trajectory’ of supposedly connected texts, I am bound to say, is little more than a dramatic but ultimately unpersuasive assertion. Any meaningful historical connection of Qumran and ‘gnosticizing’ versions of early Christianity would not now receive much scholarly support (at least not from specialists in Qumran studies), and, I contend, was always (even when first posited) a hypothesis more daring than well-founded.⁸ So, did the allure of constructing a ‘trajectory’ (allowing one to connect phenomena in an enticing explanatory image) contribute to this? It does seem in this and at least some other instances that this may be the case.

As another prime example, consider Helmut Koester’s claim that the *Gospel of Thomas* (hereafter *GThomas*) somehow preserves the supposedly originating character of the Jesus-tradition, posited as a wisdom-teacher focus largely unaffected by the more familiar *kerygma* of Jesus’ death and resurrection.⁹ This schema is impressively bold in

⁸ For an up to date and balanced assessment of the relevance of Qumran for NT studies, see Jörg Frey, ‘Critical Issues in the Investigation of the Scrolls and the New Testament,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 517-45. In the same volume, see also James R. Davila, ‘Exploring the Mystical Background of the Dead Sea Scrolls,’ pp. 433-54. To be sure, Robinson was able to quote a few other scholars who referred to Qumran as exhibiting ‘gnostic’ motifs, but these views were ventured a few decades before the full body of Qumran texts was published and reflect an opinion that is now certainly not held among Qumran specialists.

⁹ Helmut Koester, ‘GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity,’ in *Trajectories*, pp. 114-57, esp. pp. 138-39. Here, Koester claims that *Q* ‘domesticated’ the Jesus-sayings in an apocalyptic direction, allowing the Synoptic Evangelists to incorporate them into their narrative gospels, but ‘Neither of these developments seems to have touched the *logoi* tradition that found its way into the *Gospel of Thomas*,’ and so ‘The criterion controlling *Thomas*’ *logoi* is apparently more closely connected with the internal principle of this gattung as it gave focus to the transmission of Jesus’ sayings: the authority of the word of wisdom as such . . .’ so that ‘a direct and almost unbroken continuation of Jesus’ own teaching takes place—unparalleled anywhere in the canonical tradition . . .’ See also the enthusiastic discussion of Koester’s views by Ron Cameron, ‘The *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins,’ in *The Future of Early Christianity*, pp. 381-92, who, on the basis of the *Gospel of Thomas* claims, ‘A sayings gospel with its own compositional integrity, generic identity, and transmissional history has been identified, situated at a particular juncture in early Christian history, and seen to be conceptually governed by a sapiential way of viewing the world’ (p. 388, emphasis mine). Yet, curiously, Cameron then goes on to urge that early Christian writings should be ‘positioned at the intersection of complex textual and social histories,’ taking account of ‘how ancient authors entertained the various encounters with groups and repeated engagements with texts’ (p. 389). I do not think that his claims for *GThomas* reflect adequately the complexity of early Christian interaction that he acknowledges. For a very different proposal, see April D. DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), who urges a ‘rolling’ growth of *GThomas* from a ‘kernel’ to its more familiar form/contents. Certainly, there is evident fluidity in the text

imagination, but I think that accepting it requires us to resist too much of what else we know about early Christianity more broadly, as well as contrary specific evidence in the *GThomas* that it has been shaped in reaction *against* other (likely prior) Christian views (e.g., the disdain toward other versions of Christianity reflected in *GThomas* 13).¹⁰

Moreover, Koester's claim also does not deal adequately with important observable features of the early collections of Jesus' sayings in question. As commonly understood, the sayings-source 'Q' was arranged topically, and in the form(s) appropriated in the Gospel of Matthew (hereafter GMatthew) and the Gospel of Luke (hereafter GLuke) even seems to have had a narrative sub-structure reflected in the ordering of its contents.¹¹ Even if we accept Kloppenborg's debated hypothesis of an originating layer of material ('QI') characterized by an emphasis on Jesus' 'wisdom' sayings and a dearth of eschatological notes, even then we have a text that seems to have an overall shape ordered by several clusters of topically-arranged sayings material.¹² By contrast, although its contents include a few small clusters of sayings that seem connected topically, *GThomas* has no obvious overall structure or ordering of material.¹³ In short,

of *GThomas* reflected in the differences between the Greek fragments and the later Coptic version from Nag Hammadi.

¹⁰ See, e.g., John W. Marshall, 'The *Gospel of Thomas* and the Cynic Jesus,' in *Whose Historical Jesus?*, ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), pp. 37-60. Cf. Cameron's puzzling discussion ('The *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins,' p. 391), first acknowledging that *Gospel of Thomas* shows acquaintance with, and rejection of, 'the apocalyptic responses' of other Christians and the *kerygma* of Jesus' redemptive death, and then asserting that *GThomas* provides the basis for a new way 'to imagine the origins of Christianity' involving an originating 'wisdom paradigm' (p. 391), reflecting 'an independent Jesus movement, which persisted over the course of several decades of social history' (p. 392). How can a text so obviously shaped in reaction against *prior/other* versions of early Christianity be taken so readily as indicative of some putatively earlier, even original form?

¹¹ For efforts to reconstruct Q, see James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q* (Leuven/Minneapolis: Peeters/Fortress Press, 2000); J. S. Kloppenborg et al., *The Sayings Gospel Q in Greek and English with Parallels From the Gospels of Mark and Thomas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001). I have noted the narrative sub-structure of Q previously in *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), esp. pp. 246-48. For purposes of the present discussion, it is neither feasible nor necessary to engage the approaches to the Synoptic problem that dispense with Q. Obviously, if Q is judged to be an illusion, there is no trajectory to debate!

¹² Kloppenborg influentially set out his theory of a multi-stage/layer literary history of Q in John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), and in *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) he expanded and defended his proposals. I have offered my own analysis of Q, and a critical engagement with Koppenborg's views as well, in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 217-57.

¹³ See my discussion of *GThomas* and my engagement with other scholars in *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 452-79, esp. pp. 455-58, on its literary character. For a cogent analysis of issues, see Risto Uro, *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

GThomas and *Q* do not really seem to reflect any similar literary dynamic or principles. Granted, Koester does not assert a *direct literary* connection between *Q* and *GThomas*. But my point is that the dynamics apparently operative in these two texts are so different that it is dubious to posit *any* kind of special connection, any ‘trajectory’ linking them, whether literary or conceptual. I submit that the only thing that *Q* and *GThomas* have in common is that they are collections of sayings ascribed to Jesus. But surely, given the significance of Jesus in early Christianity, no particular Christian ‘trajectory’, conceptual or literary, connecting these two texts is needed to account for that!

As reflected already in the examples cited, a second and related major problem with the trajectory model is, to state matters candidly, that it simply does not reflect adequately the historical data. Part of the reason may perhaps be the apparent impetus for the model. Koester, for example, indicates with commendable candour in a retrospective essay in the 1991 *Festschrift* in his honour that his own views were heavily shaped in *reaction against* the traditional ecclesiastical model of a primary and unified orthodoxy.¹⁴ He states explicitly that his motive was to de-centre this traditional model, and traditional New Testament studies as well, by emphasizing a plurality of versions of earliest Christianity; and, importantly, he indicates that this bold aim was ventured for theological and political reasons. So, e.g., viewing the NT canon as ‘the result of a deliberate attempt to exclude certain voices from the early period of Christianity: heretics, Marcionites, Gnosticism, Jewish Christians, perhaps also women,’ Koester urged, ‘It is the responsibility of the New Testament scholar to help these voices to be heard again.’¹⁵ Indeed, Koester declares, ‘Interpretation of the Bible is justified only if it is a source for political and religious renewal, or it is not worth the effort.’¹⁶

His candour is admirable, and it is an intriguing proposal that, for the sake of contemporary political and/or religious aims, NT scholars should be advocates of this or

¹⁴ Helmut Koester, ‘Epilogue: Current Issues in New Testament Scholarship,’ in *The Future of Early Christianity*, pp. 467-76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 472. As will be clear later in this essay, I view the emergent NT canon in the second and third centuries as reflecting also a certain inclusive dynamic, though there were limits to that inclusiveness. It is also not clear to me that some of those ‘excluded’ would have wanted to be included with other types of Christians. Marcion, for example, seems to have held a rather more exclusivist view of his teaching, and texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* seem likewise to reflect a strong disdain for Christians other than those to whom the text seems directed (e.g., *GThomas* 13).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

that ancient version of Christianity over against more traditional versions. But there may also be potential dangers in allowing such concerns to shape quite so much one's approach to historical inquiry. Indeed, I dare to suggest that this sharply reactive motive may help account for a certain corresponding over-simplification of matters in the trajectories model.¹⁷ As stated earlier, in place of the 'ecclesiastical' model of a uni-linear development originating in a primal unity followed by subsequent diversity, the trajectories model can seem to posit multiple relatively uni-linear developments. And herein lies a corresponding over-simplification.

Therefore, in view of the shortcomings of the trajectories model, I submit that we should seek a better one that corresponds more adequately to the data, and that will aid heuristically in what should be the major aim of the study of Christian Origins, to grasp as accurately as we can the historical phenomena in question.

A More Adequate Model: Interactive-Diversity

To be sure, there was diversity or variety in early Christianity from the outset. Bauer's 1934 book has been credited with making some scholars more aware of early Christian diversity; but this should have been clear all along, for all our earliest Christian sources candidly convey the diverse nature of the young Christian movement. This is a point justifiably emphasized in the trajectories model. So let us first consider a bit further the nature of early Christian diversity.

As early as the Jerusalem church, there was linguistic diversity, as likely reflected in the Acts depiction of 'Hebrews' and 'Hellenists,' terms which probably designate respectively those Jews in the Jerusalem church whose first language was Aramaic and those whose first/primary language was Greek.¹⁸ Also, Paul's deployment of the little '*Marana tha*' formula in 1 Corinthians 16:22 is commonly taken as reflecting his

¹⁷ By contrast, I am reminded of a former senior colleague's characterization of a junior colleague: 'He is neither captive to his tradition nor in reaction against it.' Would that we all could live up to this sort of characterization!

¹⁸ Craig C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division Within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), offers what I regard as a persuasive analysis of the various issues. I have discussed these groups more briefly in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 206-14.

acquaintance with Aramaic-speaking circles of Jewish believers, as distinguished from the Greek-speaking (gentile) congregations to whom he wrote.¹⁹

Moreover, remarkably early there was also a trans-local diversity. In Acts we have reports of the young Christian movement quickly spreading from Jerusalem other sites in Jewish Palestine, to Damascus, Antioch and Samaria, and through the activities of Paul and others (often anonymous) spreading through various locations in Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and elsewhere. Though the historicity of some features of Acts has been challenged, it is commonly accepted that there was an early and rapid trans-local spread of the young Christian movement to locations such as these.²⁰ It is to be expected that this remarkably rapid spread of the Christian movement would have been accompanied by diversity, Christian circles taking on something of the character of the various locales, and also the varying ethnic groups and social classes from which converts came.

In particular urban settings there was often ethnic and social diversity, even within a given congregation. It is now often thought that at least some of the intra-church diversity reflected in 1 Corinthians arose from, and reflects, social differences in the Corinthian church, exhibited, for example, in behaviour at the 'Lord's Supper' (11:17-34).²¹ The different attitudes toward 'food sacrificed to idols' (8:1-13) comprised another potentially serious difference in Corinth that may well have reflected different social

¹⁹ E.g., J. A. Fitzmyer, 'New Testament Kyrios and Maranatha and Their Aramaic Background,' in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), pp. 218-35; Martin Hengel, 'Abba, Maranatha, Hosanna und die Anfänge der Christologie,' in *Studien zur Christologie, Kleine Schriften IV* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 496-534. Paul's references to Simon Peter as 'Cephas' (Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14; 1 Cor 1:12) were likely intended to show that Paul related to him more familiarly, and perhaps as a fellow Aramaic-speaking Jew. Paul's references to himself as a 'Hebrew' in 2 Cor 11:22 and Philip 3:5 likely served to claim that, though a Diaspora Jew, he was thoroughly Jewish, and perhaps that he spoke Aramaic (and read Hebrew) in addition to his obvious facility in Greek. But cf. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 307-8, who sees 'Hebrew' as simply signalling that Paul saw himself as a genuine Jew.

²⁰ Acts references to the spread of the Christian movement to Damascus and Antioch, for example, are corroborated by Paul: Damascus (2 Cor 11:30-33; Gal 1:17); Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). He also refers to multiple 'churches' in Judaea (Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 2:14-16), 'Judaea' likely referring broadly to what was later called 'Palestine', as urged by Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (London: SCM; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 36. Hengel and Schwemer colorfully described 'the first beginnings of the Jesus community after Easter' as stamped by 'an unexpected explosion with successive pressure waves' (p. 27). On Damascus and its Jewish community as a site of early Christian development, *ibid.*, pp. 55-61.

²¹ E.g., the influential proposal by Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

groups. Likewise, Paul's exhortations in Romans 14:1—15:6 are widely thought to address differences that likely reflect a diversity of a social or ethnic nature.²²

But along with the evident diversity, a well-attested 'networking' was another feature of early Christianity. This involved various activities, among them the sending and exchange of texts, believers travelling for trans-local promotion of their views (as, e.g., the 'men from James' in Gal 2:11, or Apollos' travels to Corinth in 1 Cor 1:12; 3:5-9; 16:12), representatives sent for conferral with believers elsewhere (as depicted, e.g., Acts 15:1-35), or sent to express solidarity with other circles of believers (as, e.g., those accompanying the Jerusalem offering in 1 Cor 16:3-4). After all, travel and communication were comparatively well developed in the Roman world generally, for business, pilgrimage to religious sites/occasions, for health, to consult oracles, for athletic events, sightseeing, and other purposes, not only wealthy, but also a good many ordinary people.²³ 'So,' as Richard Bauckham observed, 'the context in which the early Christian movement developed was not conducive to parochialism; quite the opposite.'²⁴ Indeed, in that world of frequent travel and communication, the early Christians particularly seem to have been given to networking, devoting impressive resources of time, money and personnel to this, and on a wide trans-local scale.²⁵

The point I wish to emphasize is that for an adequate historical picture of early Christianity this intense interaction is as vital a factor as Christian diversity, and we also need to capture this in any adequate model of early Christianity. To appreciate the usefulness of the model that I propose, let us now consider further the interaction of early Christian diversity. Space requires that we limit ourselves to a few examples, hopefully

²² The massive body of scholarly discussion of Romans 14—15 need not be canvassed here. For a recent, extended analysis of the textual data and scholarship, see Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 829-85.

²³ See Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974).

²⁴ Richard Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?' in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 9-48), citing p. 32.

²⁵ Others have commented on this: Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. 62-70; Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1995), pp. 82-143; Michael B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication between churches in the First Christian Generation,' in *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 49-70; Eldon J. Epp, 'New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,' in *The Future of Early Christianity*, pp. 35-56.

sufficient to make the point intended here. Chronologically, we can begin with some data from Paul's letters.

Examples of Interactive Diversity

It is widely agreed among scholars that Paul's letters echo and convey some very early liturgical and confessional expressions/formulae that derive from 'pre-Pauline' usage.²⁶ Among the commonly-cited instances, Romans 1:3-4 is prominent with its formulaic confession of Jesus as 'seed of David according to the flesh' and 'declared the Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.' As reflected in Robert Jewett's recent commentary, there is broad scholarly agreement that in this text Paul employs, and likely adapts, an originally Jewish-Christian confession.²⁷ The declaration of Jesus' Davidic descent and several other terms used in the text combine to lead scholars to this judgment. So, Paul here inserts strategically early in Romans this confession that stems from Jewish believers, in Jewett's view likely from 'the Aramaic-speaking primitive church.'²⁸ Of course, Paul had his reasons for doing so, which we cannot go into here. For the present discussion, my point is *that* he was able and ready to do so. This demonstrates an acquaintance and interaction with Jewish-Christian circles in which the christological emphases (e.g., the ascription of Davidic sonship to Jesus, and the so-called 'adoptionist' connection of Jesus' divine sonship and his resurrection) were likely distinguishable from those that were more frequently touted in his own Greek-speaking gentile congregations (and in Paul's other letters).

On the other hand, there are also indications of far more adversarial interactions as well, and at a very early date. Paul's letter to the Galatians will serve to illustrate this. Exegetes are agreed that this epistle reflects Paul's exasperation over unidentified other

²⁶ An older and insufficiently noted work that underscored Paul's use of traditional Christian material is A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961; original ed. 1940). But note the critique of the term 'pre-Pauline' as 'ambiguous and therefore open to misunderstanding' in Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM, 1983), e.g., pp. 32, 42, 44. As Hengel notes, given that Paul's 'conversion' likely happened scarcely two to three years maximum after Jesus' crucifixion, 'pre-Pauline' strictly designates a very narrow period of time. Indeed, the whole essay in which Hengel's comments appear ('Christology and New Testament Chronology,' pp. 30-47) should be required reading for NT scholars.

²⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, pp. 97-98, 103-8. Debates continue over the nature and extent of Paul's adaptation of the confession.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104, echoing the proposal of Leslie C. Allen, 'The Old Testament Background of (προ)όριζεν in the New Testament,' *NTS* 17 (1970-71), pp. 104-8.

Christians (probably Jewish) who have visited the Galatian churches calling into question the adequacy of Paul's gospel and urging his gentile converts to compete their conversion by circumcision and a commitment to Torah-observance. Paul represents these people as proclaiming 'a different gospel . . . confusing you and seeking to pervert the gospel of Christ' (Gal 1:6-7), and he thunders an anathema on anyone who proclaims a gospel contrary to that which he preached (1:9).

Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 10—11 Paul energetically defends himself and his mission against unnamed other Christians who seem to have questioned his legitimacy as apostle, caustically referring to them as 'super-apostles' (11:5), and then as 'false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ,' even suggesting that they are servants of Satan (11:13-15). This is rather clearly an example of early Christian diversity of a more hostile variety! But it is also indication of the *interaction* that I emphasize here, with non-Pauline teachers visiting Corinth (with intent!) and Paul reacting with an uncompromising vigour. In this case we have no reason to think that either side surrendered as a result of this combative set of incidents, but Paul and those he opposed were certainly aware of each other and shaped their respective messages accordingly. 'Interaction' can be of various types, to be sure, from more positive to highly negative. It can result in some exchange and adaptation or in a hardening of previous positions. But my point is that early Christian diversity was often (even typically?) of a highly interactive nature.

At the literary level, I suppose that the most widely accepted examples of interactive diversity are represented in the Synoptic Gospels. To cite a view that every introductory New Testament course conveys, it is commonly held that the authors of GMatthew and GLuke drew heavily on GMark, even though each of these three authors had distinguishable aims and likely reflected varying Christian views. So, for example, the author of GMatthew incorporated ca. 90% of GMark, but brought to bear a large body of sayings material organized into discourses that present Jesus as the authoritative teacher, and with a pronounced Judaic tone to his teachings. To be sure, GMark

emphasizes *that* Jesus taught, but the author of GMatthew clearly aimed to convey much more adequately *what* Jesus taught.²⁹

To take another example of Synoptic literary interaction, a large part of the sayings material in GMatthew is widely thought to derive from ‘*Q*’. Just how remarkable an example of literary interaction the Matthean appropriation of *Q* represents depends, of course, on what one makes of *Q*. If, e.g., we take *Q* as comprising a collection of Jesus-sayings that may have served instruction and proclamation among circles of Christians, whose religious emphases likely encompassed more than what we have reflected in *Q*, then the inclusion of this material in GMatthew is interesting but was not a revolutionary development. On the other hand, if with some scholars we take *Q* to have been a distinctive ‘sayings-gospel’ that in some significant measure in itself rather adequately represents the religious outlook and views of a very distinctive circle of early Christians (e.g., the absence of a passion/resurrection narrative indicative of a lack of knowledge of, or interest in, these matters), then the incorporation of this body of material in GMatthew would comprise a more dramatic instance of interactive diversity, even the wholesale appropriation by an author coming from a quite distinguishable standpoint.

It is not important here to make a case for either option, although elsewhere I have given my reasons for preferring the former view of *Q* as more plausible.³⁰ Under either option, the incorporation of *Q* in GMatthew represents a significant literary example of early Christian interaction. Moreover, the appropriation of *Q* in GLuke, which reflects yet another distinguishable early Christian outlook and literary emphasis, further shows that this specific sort of interaction and appropriation of material was by no means unique.

As an example of another kind of early Christian interactive diversity, I refer to the large study of various early Christian circles in Ephesus by Paul Trebilco.³¹ Noting that ‘the range of New Testament and early Christian texts which are linked with Ephesus is probably greater than that for any other city in which there was an early Christian

²⁹ On Mark’s emphasis, see, e.g., Vernon K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³⁰ I have laid out my argument in favor of taking *Q* as a ‘sayings-source’ and not a ‘sayings-gospel’ in Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, esp. pp. 217-44.

³¹ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

community,' Tebilco investigates earliest indications of Paul's ministry in Ephesus (considering references in Paul's letters and in Acts), weighing also what we can learn about Christians in Ephesus from the Pastoral Letters, Revelation and the Johannine Letters, proceeding then to a consideration of Ignatius' Letter to Ephesus. He concludes that a 'Pauline community was well established' in Ephesus through Paul's ministry, but with 'some indications of diversity within this group.' By ca. 55 CE, most Christians in Ephesus were 'Pauline', but not all Ephesian Christians identified themselves with reference to Paul. By 80-100 CE there were various Christian groups in Ephesus, including a Pauline group addressed in the Pastoral Letters, a Johannine group addressed in the Johannine Letters, 'opponents' of the author of the Pastoral Letters, Johannine 'secessionists' (criticized especially in 1 John), and the Nicolaitans vilified in Revelation.³²

Trebilco also notes in some texts that relate to Ephesus evidence reflecting arguments of one group against 'another group that they regarded as 'opponents'.' He concludes that at least by the time of the Pastoral Letters (ca. 80-100 CE), 'there was a drawing of lines by some Christians in order to exclude others who regarded themselves as Christians,' the Pastoral Letters, Johannine Letters, Revelation and Ignatius reflecting this. 'Thus, one continuing element in the life of Christians in Ephesus was conflict between Christians, and the presence of differing strands of Christian faith.'³³

However, urging that 'we should not think solely in terms of the opposition of one group to another,' he suggests that the intended readers of the Pastorals and the Johannine Letters 'would have been aware of each other's existence, would not have refused contact with one another . . . and would have had 'non-hostile' relations.'³⁴ Tebilco demurs from calling this 'unity,' for these Christians 'clearly retained the distinct identity of their separate groups,' and he prefers to characterize their relations as a 'commonality' in which they were ready 'to acknowledge the validity of each other's claim to be part of the

³² Tebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, p. 712. For Tebilco's analysis of references in Paul's letters, pp. 53-103, for his discussion of Acts references, pp. 104-196.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 716.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 716.

wider movement that we call early Christianity,' and were not 'hermetically sealed against each other.'³⁵

I find Trebilco's conclusions soundly based, but it is not possible here to allow for an adequate engagement with them. Indeed, given the size of his discussion (700+ pages) it would likely require considerable space to do so! My purpose in citing his study of Ephesian Christianity is simply to offer it as affording us another well-grounded analysis showing the interactive diversity that seems to me widely characteristic of early Christianity.³⁶ He pictures distinguishable groups, each with its own sense of identity, very much aware of other groups, and the groups all very much engaged in various ways with one another.

Conclusion

Although much more could be said and more examples adumbrated, I hope that the preceding discussion suffices to make the essential points of concern here. Though rightly emphasizing the diversity in the Christian movement from its earliest years, the trajectories model does not provide an adequate representation of the complexity of interactions and developments in early Christianity. Indeed, it can lead to the sort of over-simplification and artificial connections that I have pointed to in examples cited earlier, and the curious interpretive moves that can follow. Along with a genuine diversity and diachronic development, we also have to take on board adequately the complexity of frequent and varied interaction of the diverse Christian circles, which do not readily fit into neat trajectories.

This interaction was sometimes of various, more positive, 'non-hostile' sorts, e.g., one circle appropriating and/or adapting elements from another, and, at the other extreme, sometimes of a more negative, hostile nature, as, e.g., in Paul's denunciations of Jewish-Christian opponents, the condemnation of 'Nicolaitans' in Revelation, or the disdain toward the other apostles and the Christian circles they represent in *GThomas* 12-13.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 716-17.

³⁶ Granted, Trebilco refers to an observable 'trajectory of Pauline influence in Ephesus from Paul, through the Pastorals and on to Ignatius' (ibid., p. 714). But it seems to me that Trebilco's use of the term 'trajectory' here is simply his way of referring to a specific instance of continuing Pauline influence over against Bauer's claim that by ca. 100 CE Paul's influence had almost totally disappeared, and that Ignatius' knowledge of Paul was based solely on 1 Corinthians (cf. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp. 83-85).

But, in any case, there was a rich and varied, sometimes vigorous, interaction of early Christian diversity.

At least in the early centuries, this interaction did not apparently produce a homogenizing of Christian faith, even among those circles whose interaction was of a more ‘non-hostile’ nature. Instead, a diversity involving a spectrum of versions of Christianity seems to have continued, at least through the first two centuries or more, although their engagements with one another produced various reactions and responses, sometimes subtle, sometimes more explicit, sometimes minor, sometimes major.

Indeed, the NT itself can be thought of as a ‘macro-example’ of the interactive diversity of this period. One of the broadly agreed results of modern NT studies is the recognition that the NT comprises writings of varied outlook and emphasis, even significantly different points of view in some matters, these writings likely reflecting distinguishable circles and versions of early Christianity. Yet the gathering of these writings, an early stage of this process represented in the emergence of a four-fold Gospel collection, shows a significant interaction of many of these early circles.³⁷ Over against the anxieties of some other Christians of the period about plural Gospels (e.g., the homogenizing tendency of Tatian, and the exclusivist stance of Marcion), the four-fold Gospel collection represents an affirmation of interacting diversity of a more positive kind that included preserving the discrete literary character of each of the four Gospels.³⁸

Another early and highly significant indication of the interactive dynamics that led to the NT collection as we know it is given in the curious reference to a Pauline letter-collection in 2 Peter 3:15-16 (dated variously ca. 70-120 CE). Here, the author, notably

³⁷ On the early emergence of the four-fold Gospel, see, e.g., G. N. Stanton, ‘The Fourfold Gospel,’ *NTS* 43 (1997), pp. 317-46; Theo K. Heckel, , *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium*, WUNT, 120 (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1999); James A. Kelhoffer, , *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, WUNT, 2/112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); *idem*, , ‘How Soon a Book’ Revisited: EUAGGELION As a Reference to ‘Gospel’ Materials in the First Half of the Second Century,’ *ZNW* 95 (2004), pp. 1-34; Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 2000). Despite differences on some specifics, these agree in judging that the four-fold Gospel emerged sometime in the first half of the second century CE.

³⁸ See, e.g., Helmut Merkel, *Die Pluralität der Evangelien als theologisches und exegetisches Problem in der alten Kirche* (Bern/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978); and, earlier, Oscar Cullmann, ‘The Plurality of the Gospels As a Theological Problem in Antiquity,’ in *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Westminster, 1956), pp. 39-54.

writing in the name of Peter, both affirms the ‘beloved brother’ Paul’s letters as ‘scripture’ and yet also grants that they include some difficult portions that make them subject to variant interpretations, including some interpretations that the author regards as seriously wrong.³⁹ For our purposes, it is noteworthy that the text appears to reflect a view of Paul’s letters as scripture held by Christian circles that otherwise differed sharply from each other. According to this passage, both the author of 2 Peter and those he calls ‘the ignorant and unstable’, whom he condemns for their ‘twisted’ readings, apparently shared a high regard for Paul’s letters, and wrestled with one another over their true meaning.

As a concluding exercise, let us consider briefly how the ‘interactive diversity’ model might affect our view of *Q* and the putative trajectory connecting it to *GThomas* posited by Robinson and Koester. If in fact *Q* and *GThomas* are not in any particular sense connected via some special ‘trajectory’, and what they have in common is simply that they are both collections of Jesus-sayings (albeit of very different character), then we are freed to consider each in its own right and in connection with more relevant and synchronous factors and dynamics. This, I contend afford us interpretative gain.

So, e.g., *Q* can be approached, not retrospectively in light of the later dynamics of *GThomas*, but, instead, in light of its own character and the other evidence of Christian dynamics and developments of the approximate time when *Q* may have been put together. Viewed, not as some early expression of the ‘revealer’ motif that we see expressed later in *GThomas*, in which Jesus as a teacher/speaker was privileged over (and even played off against) other christological emphases, but instead as a body of Jesus-sayings whose topical arrangement suggests perhaps a more prosaic and didactic purpose, *Q* takes on a very different character. Indeed, I would say *Q* comes more into its own. The same is the case for *GThomas*, which acquires a much more creative quality and significance, posing a very different kind of early Christian stance, one much more set over against the other/prior versions of Christianity that the text holds up to derision. Neither text is necessary, nor even particularly useful, to appreciate the nature and

³⁹ Of course, we cannot know how many letters comprised the Pauline collection known to the author of 2 Peter, but a *collection* of some size is in view. I commend the discussion of the passage in Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter. Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), pp. 327-34.

purposes of the other; and connecting them in a supposed ‘trajectory’ is misleading and may play mischief in comprehending the historical provenance of either one.

I urge, therefore, that ‘interactive diversity’ represents a superior model that captures more adequately the complexity characteristic of early Christianity, and that can perhaps serve better heuristically in the study of Christian origins. With all due acknowledgement of the scholarly desire to produce order from disparate data, we should also respect the complexity of developments across the first couple of centuries of Christianity, and prefer a model that better accommodates and represents that complexity.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Responding to an earlier draft of this essay, Paula Fredriksen pointed me to the effort to model visually the interactions of versions of Jewish and early Christian circles by Martin Goodman, ‘Modeling the ‘Parting of the Ways’,’ in *The Ways That Never Parted*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 119-30, esp. pp. 121-29. Though not directly applicable to the phenomena addressed here, Goodman’s charts do illustrate the difficulty of modeling a comparable complexity.