ON REDESCRIBING CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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1. The Myth of Christian Origins

For almost two thousand years, the Christian imagination of Christian origins has echoed the gospel stories contained in the New Testament. That is not surprising. The gospel accounts erased the pre-gospel histories; their inclusion within the church’s New Testament consigned other accounts to oblivion; and during the long reach of Christian history, from the formation of the New Testament in the fourth century to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth, there was no other story except satires of cabbage stocks and kings.

According to Christian imagination, Christianity began when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified as the Christ and Son of God, appeared after his resurrection, overwhelmed his disciples with his holy spirit, established the first church in Jerusalem, and sent the apostles out on a mission to tell the world what they had seen and heard. Telling what they had seen was enough to convince the Jews and convert the gentiles into thinking that God had planned the whole thing in order to start a new religion. The new religion was about sin and redemption. What it took to start the new religion was all there as a kind of divine implantation in the life of Jesus, needing only to germinate and develop as early Christians heard about it, believed it, and came to understand its import. We might call this scenario the big bang concept of Christian origins.

However, since the Enlightenment, the effort to understand Christian origins has been pursued by scholars as a matter of historical and literary criticism, and the New Testament account has slowly been dismantled. The New Testament is no longer seen by critical scholars as a coherent set of apostolic texts that document a single set of dramatic events and their monolinear history of subsequent influence and theological development. Instead of one gospel story, we have four different accounts within the New Testament and several other gospels that were not included. Instead of one picture of the historical Jesus that all early Christians must have
had in view, we now have several competing views. We now know that there were many groups from the beginning, creating disparate traditions, responding to other groups differently, and developing various rituals and patterns of social congregation. Plural theologies and conflicting ideologies, as well as competing authorities and leaders, were the order of the day. So factors other than the marvels portrayed in the gospel account must have been at work.

And yet, the older picture of Christian origins according to the gospel story, largely Lukan, is still in everyone's mind. It is as if the emergence of Christianity cannot be accounted for any other way. It is as if the accumulation of critical information within the discipline of New Testament studies cannot compete with the gospel's mystique. This is odd, for without a more appropriate picture of the way Christianity began, the data pursued by critical inquiry have no frame of reference to give them any significance. These results of our critical inquiry seem to be floating free in the archives of a guild that has no log or registry to keep track of the knowledge it produces. It is as if everyone secretly hopes that the core of the gospel's account will eventually be shown still to be true. Thus the scholarly production of the guild has become a brew devoid of recipe. Are we waiting for some magic to make the mix a potion, redeem the gospel account, and make all of our labour finally seem worthwhile?

This Consultation on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins was sponsored in the conviction that the time has come to account for Christian origins some other way. My own view is that a redescription of Christian origins would ultimately have to account for the emergence of the gospels themselves, turning them into interesting products of early Christian thinking instead of letting them determine the parameters within which all of our data must find a place to rest. With that in mind, I would like to take stock of the current state of New Testament studies and then present a proposal for a redescription of Christian origins.

2. Taking Stock of our Studies

We can begin by making a list of items in need of explanation. Some of these items are traditional aporiae, known as the gaps or holes in our systems of explanation. Others are clichés that have served explanatory functions, but are in reality unexamined assumptions in need themselves of explanation. Others are easily recognized as unresolved issues still under debate. Taken as a whole the list suggests that, as a scholarly discipline, we