According to the Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain Jesus summoned his disciples not to resist evildoers and to be compliant with their adversaries. If someone strikes them on one cheek, they are not to strike back but to turn the other cheek too. They shall love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, and pray for those who abuse or persecute them. By this non-violent behaviour Jesus’ disciples will imitate God and be God’s children.¹

The fact that these instructions occur in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but not in the Gospel of Mark, implies that most probably they derive from Q, the sayings source which, for the most part, consisted of Jesus’ teaching. There are no historical-critical reasons to deny the gist of these exhortations to Jesus.² His teaching is echoed by Paul who exhorts the Roman Christians to bless those who persecute them, not to repay evil for evil, to live—in so far as it depends on them—peaceably with all people, not to avenge themselves, but to put to shame their enemies by doing good to them; in this way they will overcome evil with good.³

We might wonder whether Jesus and Paul always practised their own counsels, since the same Gospels and Paul’s own epistles affirm that both could severely censure their adversaries, respectively the scribes and Pharisees and the preachers who taught the Gospel message in a way different from the apostle.⁴ Yet according to the synoptic Gospels Jesus passively underwent his arrest

² U. Luz, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 1–7) (EEK I, 1; Düsseldorf, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2002⁵), 256–259; 385; 402.
⁴ See Matt 15:1–20; 23:3–36; Luke 11:37–52; 2 Cor 11:33–15; Gal 1:6–9; Phil 3:2. It may be added that sometimes Jesus was friendly toward a scribe (Mark 12:28–34) and that some Pharisees appreciated him (Luke 13:31; John 3:1–2; 7:50–51; 19:39);
and the process that led to his crucifixion; in this respect he was consistent with his own instructions.

The theme of this contribution is not to retrieve whom Jesus considered as the enemies that his disciples had to love and for whom they had to pray, or what this love meant in their daily lives, but how these sayings were understood by a limited number of authors in the first centuries of Christianity. Furthermore, we will regularly pay attention to the question how far the Christians really practised these lofty instructions. As a matter of fact, this investigation on the ancient interpretation of these texts, rather than yielding a comprehensive survey of the extent to which Christians of those centuries renounced violence, intends to offer only a cross-section from the immense literature of that time with regard to our theme.

Of course we have to distinguish the various contexts in which the words of Jesus and Paul have been received and interpreted. It matters whether an author writes before or after Constantine’s turn to Christianity in 313 CE, whether he writes to Christians or to authorities who either oppose or favour his religion, whether a quotation or allusion has consciously been included into an apology or an occasional homily or another discourse or whether an author writes a commentary on a New Testament writing or delivers a series of homilies on it and is therefore forced to say something on the texts under discussion. The following arrangement reflects these different contexts.

1 Before Constantine

How did Christians refer to and apply the instructions to love their enemies, to pray for their persecutors, and to renounce violence and revenge in the first centuries of their existence, when their convictions started to spread in the Roman empire as a unknown religion that met with much suspicion? We will first pay attention to texts addressed to Christians.

1.1 Texts Addressed to Christians

The beginning of the Didache (ca. 100 CE) immediately reminds us of this teaching in the introduction of ‘the path of life’. Walter Bauer claimed that the author understood these instructions of prayer and love for enemies and persecutors in the sense of a following counsel, ‘Do not hate anyone—but reprove

5 Didache 1:3–5 (LCL 24).