A statement on Christian theology in the second century made in 1875 by that giant in Patristic Studies Joseph Barber Lightfoot offers a good starting-point for this paper. In one of his “Essays on the work entitled Supernatural Religion”, that master-piece of sober, yet devastating criticism, he wrote: “The history of the first three quarters of the second century is necessarily obscure owing to the paucity of remains. A flood of light is suddenly poured in during the remaining years of the century.”

This verdict was given in a particular context, the acquaintance with the Fourth Gospel in that age, but that was just the particular situation which exemplified the more general rule. It was not a passing remark, but the terse expression of Lightfoot’s view based on the expert knowledge he possessed of this field.

Lightfoot wrote these words now a hundred years ago, standing at the threshold of a century which saw among many other great developments in scientific research a magnificent and unprecedented revival of patristic studies in England, France and particularly in Germany. We all know the names of the heroes on whose shoulders we stand, to use a familiar phrase which is the expression of the real situation, and remember in their company the great army of diligent workers in this field. Looking

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1 J. B. Lightfoot, Essays on the work entitled Supernatural Religion (London 1893) 53 (the Essays, collected in this book appeared in “The Contemporary Review” between 1874 and 1877; the quotation is found in the second Essay under the title “the Silence of Eusebius” of January 1875; for the history behind this work of Lightfoot see H. Chadwick, The Vindication of Christianity in Westcott’s Thought (Cambridge 1961) 20–23). – A verdict similar to that of Lightfoot is given about the same time by another great Patristic scholar, Theodor Zahn, Acta Joannis (Erlangen 1880) S. II: “war es der Wunsch und die Hoffnung, der kirchengeschichtlichen Forschung auf der quellenarmen Strecke der Jahre 70–200 die eine oder andere ... Quelle zu erschliessen” (italics are mine).
back to the days of the 1870's we see an enormous change. Has history effaced Lightfoot's words or do they still stand?

Great progress has been made; that is beyond dispute. Many new texts have been discovered, beginning with the Didache, followed by e.g. the Apology of Aristides, The Odes of Solomon, the Homily of Melito, many texts of the so-called New Testament Apocrypha and crowned by the marvellous library of Nag Hammadi; texts that had been in the hand of scholars for several centuries became better known. Excellent studies were written on these texts old and new. But is it not true that the new light brought by the new texts was accompanied by great shadows as well? The number of riddles and puzzles has also grown with the extent of knowledge. And can we say that the lament on the "paucity of remains" has been changed into the triumph-song of abundance? No, we see even more sharply the lack of information or the blank areas on the map. And notwithstanding the new discoveries the reading of the first five books of Eusebius' Church History, to mention only this, makes us fully aware how much is still lost. What was left is a fairly casual selection from different decades and localities, written with a special purpose in view and silent on many facts and factors, particularly about the religious life of the Christians. It is fair to say that the veil of obscurity that existed in the days Lightfoot wrote has been lifted in many ways and that great progress has been achieved; nonetheless we should always remind ourselves that darkness still reigns over large areas of that crucial second century.

In Lightfoot's view the obscurity was due to the paucity of remains. But is that true, was it even true in his days? The answer is: no! It was also owing to the fact that the existing remains had not sufficiently been examined and had not yielded the full evidence that is contained in it. And where are we now in this respect? Great progress has been made in retrieving the world in which the Christians of the 2nd century lived and confessed their faith, thanks to classical scholarship. Much clearer and more detailed information about the culture, philosophy and religious life of that time has become available. It greatly helps us to understand the expressions and reactions we read in these early documents. But has this material already fully been used in the interpretation? The answer is in the negative: too much, especially in the field of the "Dogmengeschichte" is seen as an autonomous Christian development and not as a development in a contemporary context in the full sense of the word, expressing the faith in that setting. With some notable examples from