Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity
(6 volumes)

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Available online

Publication date: November 2018
URL upon publication: www.brill.com/eeco
ISSN: 2589-7993
Highwire platform

2019 purchase options and prices
• Annual subscription: EUR 659/ US$ 790
• Outright purchase: EUR 4875/ US$ 5850
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Introduction

Early Christianity is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon – if we can even refer to it as a single phenomenon at all. Since the publication of W. Bauer’s groundbreaking study *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im frühesten Christentum* in 1934, the scholarly world has come increasingly to the conclusion that the variety of early Christian groups was not the result of the disintegration of a single, original form of Christianity over the course of several centuries but rather that variety has always been at the heart of what we call early Christianity.

The label “Christianity” is itself not unproblematic. Although the term naturally has a long history in the tradition of the Christian movement, its use, for example, to refer to 1st-century CE followers of Jesus is nevertheless an anachronism given that the term is first mentioned in the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (Magn. 10.1; Rom. 3:3; Phld. 6:1), dated to the early 2nd century CE. One can also question the appropriateness of its use for a number of groups that are currently seen as belonging to the extended family of early Christianity. Far from implying that “early Christianity” was a unified or monolithic movement, therefore, this encyclopedia uses the term as an umbrella covering a wide variety of historical phenomena.

In creating this *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, the editors have made a number of decisions with regard to its subject matter, scope, and structure. The first choice made was to focus on the most significant topics concerning early Christianity: the most important authors, texts, ideas, and places that played a role in the history of the development of Christianity. While it is impossible to provide the user with a comprehensive survey of every detail in the growth of the Christian movement, an effort was made to cover the topics that would best provide the reader with a reliable map of the early Christian movement.

A second decision made was the time period to be covered. Any periodization is bound to be arbitrary to some extent, and thus prone to criticism. For the purposes of this encyclopedia, the editors decided that the end of the 6th century CE should be the cut-off point, as by that time Christianity was established as the Orthodox, Catholic Church in both the West as well as in the East. The formative debates on the nature of God and Christ had been more or less settled, and the biblical canon had been selected and approved by church councils. In the West, the demise of the Roman Empire had led to a new political constellation, and in the East, the rise of the Byzantine Empire ushered in a new era. Late antiquity may not have a clear beginning nor a well-defined end, but it is clear that the 6th century CE belongs to late antiquity and ushered in the start of the Middle Ages. These terms are also modern labels, of course, and also subject to debate. And yet the 6th century CE has the characteristics of a transitional age in the history of early Christianity and, as such, the editors decided to include it within the scope of the encyclopedia.

Early Christianity, in all its variety, did not originate in a vacuum. It started as an intra-Jewish reform movement in Palestine, led by Jesus of Nazareth. Within one generation after Jesus’ ministry it spread over large parts of the Roman Empire, reaching Rome even before Paul. As more and more non-Jews joined the movement, Greco-Roman customs and ideas also came to play an important role. For this reason, early Christianity is just as connected with the Greco-Roman context within which it grew as with its Jewish roots. However, notwithstanding these connections, the focus of the encyclopedia is early Christianity, and Jewish and Greco-Roman topics feature only where strictly relevant.

Two other choices were important for the scope and form of *BEEC*: the need to bridge the divide between the fields of New Testament studies and Patristics, and the history of scholarship of the entries.

The fields of New Testament studies and Patristics have, over the years, grown into two separate specializations, organized into two different disciplines with their own methodologies and scholarly traditions. This makes collaboration on a project such as this a sometimes complicated task. And yet, there is no logical reason to divide early Christianity into these two separate fields. For this encyclopedia, the period covered is seen as an organic whole in which a large number of developments took place that led to the formation of the Christian church as a recognizable entity, and to the formulation of the orthodox Christian creeds as guidelines for the faith tradition.
The second decision was to include in each entry some discussion of the modern history of scholarship. Often, this historiographical discussion is included as a separate paragraph; sometimes it is interwoven with the description of the topic of the entry. Our hope is that students of early Christianity who intend to research a particular subject will find their first information in BEEC, and will be able to proceed with their research on the basis of the information found here. The articles included in the BEEC are based on exhaustive research, using both primary and secondary sources. Wherever relevant, we also include an overview of the historiography of the subject of a particular entry. If the subject of an entry has been extensively studied in the past, its historiography is included in a separate paragraph. In all other cases, the historiography is referred to where necessary. In several cases, no historiography was required, as only one or two studies on the particular subject have been published.

The editors of BEEC hope that this encyclopedia will find its way into the libraries of universities, colleges, religious, and other institutions, as well as the studies of many individual scholars. The digital version of the encyclopedia will not require much space on the shelves of a library or study, and will be easy to access and search. May it prove to be a useful and inspiring tool for the study and further understanding of early Christianity.

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Brill's VAT registration number is NL8088.46.243 B01

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