



CALL FOR PAPERS NTSSA

ANNUAL MEETING 2021

Hosted by the Early Christian Studies Subgroup

THEME: “Mapping Transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity”

Papers are invited by the Early Christian Studies subgroup for presentation at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, hosted by the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, and the Department of Religion Studies, University of Johannesburg, at the Protea Hotel Pretoria Loftuspark, 6 April 2021 – 9 April 2021.

Paper proposals should be about 150—200 words, and should address issues relating to the focus of the group and the project description. Areas to be addressed include (but are not limited to):

- Redescriptive theorising of processes of social, cultural, and religious change in the transition from traditional religious and cultic discourses to Christian discourses in the later Roman Empire;
- Aspects of the formation history of early Christian social formations, including aspects of the interaction between early Christian and Graeco-Roman material culture (incl. rituals, religious space, text production and formations of literate cultures, early Christian identity formations, etc.);
- Reading and reception of New Testament traditions in Christian Late Antiquity, exemplifying the transformative processes of the period;
- Analysis and interpretation of significant early Christian writings from the second to fourth century CE (and up to the rise of Islam in the eighth century), including aspects of the reception histories of first century apostolic era Christian literature;
- Analysis of trajectories of scholarship in the last century and a half or so, since the inception of critical/historical-critical study of early Christianity/-ies and Christian origins, and how these constructed the field of the discipline and object of study.

Paper proposers should first pay attention to the project description, “Mapping Transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity,”(see pages 3 to 9, below) for information on what is meant by transformations and transitions towards Christianity/-ies; what is meant by mapping; and for the theoretical frameworks that govern the conceptualisation of the project and the topic.

Proposals should be submitted by 1 February 2021 and sent to the project coordinators:

- Gerhard van den Heever; vdheega@unisa.ac.za
- Chris de Wet; chrisldw@gmail.com

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Individuals who wish to participate in NTSSA sessions, but who want to present papers better suited to other subgroups, should send their proposals of 150-200 words directly to the respective subgroup leaders. **These proposals should also be submitted by 1 February 2021:**

Jesus and the Gospels: Marius Nel, mjnel@sun.ac.za; and Llewellyn Howes, llewellynhowes@gmail.com

Pauline Studies: Jeremy Punt, jpunt@sun.ac.za; and Francois Wessels, francoiswessels02@gmail.com

Gender and Human Sexuality: Johnathan Jodamus, jdmjon001@gmail.com; and Nina Müller van Velden, ninamuller22@gmail.com

For information on the conference, registration, and accommodation, see the homepage of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, <https://newtestament.org.za/annual-meeting/>.



New Testament Society of Southern Africa

Early Christian Studies Subgroup

Project description

The Early Christian Studies group of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa is currently working on a multi-stage longer term project. The first culmination of the project is the offering of the main theme and papers at the 2021 annual meeting at the Protea Hotel Pretoria Loftuspark, 6 April – 9 April 2021, hosted by the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, and the Department of Religion Studies, University of Johannesburg. This will be followed up by a conference or working session to be (preliminary) hosted at the University of New Hampshire, USA. The project is envisaged to ensue in a collected volume of essays in the Brill series, *Critical Approaches to Early Christianity*.

The project leaders are: Prof. Chris L. de Wet (Unisa), dwetcl@unisa.ac.za and Prof. Gerhard van den Heever (Unisa), vdheega@unisa.ac.za. Expressions of interest can be made to the project leaders. Intending contributors are welcome to contact the project leaders with any inquiries.

While it may not be possible to fund foreign participants, we can accommodate participation in the conference by foreign colleagues through virtual conferencing via electronic media.

Mapping Transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity

Transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity

In the recent work of Jörg Rüpke, Bruce Lincoln, and Guy Stroumsa a number of transformative shifts have been identified that, in concert, define and characterise the transition from the Classical to Post-Classical world. The big religious and cultural revolution that was the Christianisation of the late Roman Empire did not arrive out of the blue, out of nothing—it was the culmination of a series of cultural shifts of long duration:

a) Transitions from inspired oracular speech to book-centred religious discourses (Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism—to name only the three most prominent, but strands of Buddhism had also made its presence felt in the late antique world—were characterised not only by the development of extensive canons of religious literature, but also by the rise of a class of expert commentators, which commentaries themselves came to constitute a library of religious resources);

b) Transitions from concrete, material, imagistic instantiations of divine presence to aniconic conceptions of divinity with concomitant new ways of mediating the divine (for instance, in the rise of various permutations of Neoplatonic theurgic and religious philosophies and practices, mysticism, and so on—outside of Christianity in Late Roman Neoplatonic philosophy and theurgy, itself a kind of ascetical gymnastics; in the rise of Jewish mysticism out of the

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intersection of Persian-derived apocalyptic discourses and “vertical” apocalyptic-cum-visionary traditions; and within Christianity with the emergence of asceticism as training for divine vision and full-blown mysticism ranging from Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory of Nyssa, and the sixth-century mystic (pseudo-) Dionysius the Aereopagite, who drew on these earlier writers; in this regard, the monotheism of Christianity was a manifestation of the wider drift towards monotheism in the Late Roman world;

c) Transitions from priestly classes of religious hierarchies to hermeneutic specialists (rabbinic and Christian teacher-theologians—even as they existed alongside a broad spectrum of popular religious practitioners, holy men, healers-diviners, etc. —constituted as class the new intellectual force determining the shape of Christian discourses but also their relation to and intersection with secular authority);

d) Transitions from monocultural, singular ethnic social entities and identity formations to international, multiethnic, and geographically dispersed populations of post-ancient religious communities held together not only by shared symbols, beliefs, and practices, but also by itinerant leaders and mobile texts, incorporation into which occurred through practices of conversion as a habituated new compartment with newly emerging social and identity formations; this implies the transition from local cultic customs to trans-ethnic and trans-local formations on the way to the formation of something approximating a “world religion”;

e) And finally, transformations of the relationships between religious institutions and the hegemonic hierarchies organising various social aggregates in the post-ancient or late antique world, that is, an emerging independence inhering in religious institutions vis-à-vis the state (the Christian church, conceived of an independent identity, exerted its social agency vis-à-vis the Roman state); this indicates the rise of the Christian church (albeit in all its varieties and manifestations) as a parallel ethnos to the various polities that succeeded the Roman Empire;

f) In the context of these transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity the rise in life-writing or biography as protreptic as a genre signaled across traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the manufacturing of a new kind of habituated internalised identity as epiphenomenon of a world in the throes of fundamental change (in other words, conversion literature as window onto discursive shifts from Antiquity to Late Antiquity). The centrality of cults of saints and hagiographies as coded social charters for social identity formation—itsself an extension of the canonical “lives” of Jesus Christ—signalled a fundamental shift from the priestly cultures of ancient societies to new kinds of cultic practices and conceptualisations of divinity centred on mythicised, idealised exemplary humans;

g) And yet, for all of these fundamental shifts, “transformations” (understood in the plural) does not mean rupture or fundamental break with the past of antiquity, but rather as multiple, multileveled, and complex manners of continuation such that the religious symbolisms and philosophical conceptualities of Greek, Roman, and Oriental cultures—Mediterranean and Middle Eastern religions as the broader context—continued to shape nascent Christianities. In

this respect it can be said that Christianity/-ies is the way in which Greek, Roman, and Oriental religions continued to exist.

Mapping Transformations

The metaphor of mapping, in the context of this project, can be applied in a number of ways:

Mapping can be taken as the thick description of under-researched, under-described, or lesser known aspects of religion in the period (Later Roman Empire from the second century onwards; Late Antiquity; Early Middle Ages; i.e., from ±150 – 600 CE, up to the rise of Islam)—essentially an inventory of significant features of the religious world.

Mapping can be taken as setting out relations between significant features of the cultural-religious landscapes-in-transition, whether across the broader Mediterranean region, or focused on smaller-scale locales, which relations can also be studied longitudinally across epochs in the sense of tracing trajectories. In this sense mapping is a comparative study.

Mapping can also be taken in a more theoretical, explanatory sense which mapping moves beyond the mere descriptive towards explanations of transformations and theorising of religion in general. In this sense mapping makes fruitful the study of transformations towards a Christian Late Antiquity for understanding of religion in general, and of the social, cultural, and ideological formations obtaining in our contemporary world which is equally in a state of fundamental transition and transformation.

Lastly, mapping also means self-reflexive study of the maps of scholarly constructions of the object/s of study, and the theoretical trajectories that informed the field over the last century and a half or so, since the rise of the critical study of Christian origins. This is then a kind of reception-historical study theorising the academic field as such.

Desideratum: Theoretical Frameworks

The project leaders are particularly keen to invite participants from a variety of disciplines, who represent a variety of theoretical perspectives, and come from a variety of geo-cultural contexts, in order to create and sustain as much of a creative rethinking, redescription, and retheorising of the field as possible. Contributions are, therefore, invited that investigate and theorise these transformations from various perspectives:

Contributions that analyse and comment Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, other Near Eastern, non-Christian as well as post-apostolic Christian literatures as concrete instantiations and evidences of such manifesting these transformations;

Aspects of the formation history of early Christian social formations, including aspects of the interaction between early Christian and Graeco-Roman material culture (incl. rituals, religious space, text production and formations of literate cultures, early Christian identity formations, etc.);

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Contributions that promote inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary studies and theorising on the formation of Christian discourse through the later Roman Empire and Late Antiquity, especially within a framework of cultural studies and discourse studies; including redescriptive theorising of processes of social, cultural, and religious change in the transition from traditional religious and cultic discourses to Christian discourses in the later Roman Empire;

Analysis and interpretation of significant early Christian writings from the second to fourth century CE (but may include traditions up to and including the rise of Islam), including aspects of the reception histories of first century apostolic era Christian literature; and

Contributions that promote the study of early Christian history as a contemporary scholarly endeavour as an interpretive analytic (i.e., metatheoretical study of the discipline of studying the history of Christianity).

That said, the disciplinary approach that governs the project is that of Early Christian Studies. Contributors are expected to work within that framework. The project coordinators request participants to also peruse the appended document, “New Testament and Early Christian Studies: Theses on Theory and Method,” for more information on how a framework of Early Christian Studies is conceived.

Project coordinators:

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New Testament and Early Christian Studies: Theses on Theory and Method

Thesis 1

The phrase, “New Testament and Early Christian Studies,” is a conjunction between two descriptors that each signifies a *study field* (a more or less bounded set of phenomena and topics; the objects, phenomena, and practices that form the fields of interest for such studies) *and a discipline* (a concert of methods and approaches; an institutionalised set of conventions of scholarship with an authorised range of conceptual language, authorised methodologies, authorised topics of research, canonical theorists and their theories, and publication outlets that serve to enshrine a particular disciplinary practice). However, the conjunctive “and” is not purely additive. It denotes a broader field of encompassment, “Early Christian Studies,” and a narrower field of focus, “New Testament,” which can be conceived of as the “e.g.,” the “for example,” of the broader field. In this conjunction, Early Christian Studies has priority in setting the theoretical and methodological agendas, while New Testament Studies is conceived as a particular focus on a delimited set of traditions, histories, practices, that constitute but a section of the broader field of Early Christian Studies.

One can speak in this regard, then, of a “conjoined super-discipline.” For the sake of brevity and convenience we take New Testament and Early Christian Studies as a discipline.

Thesis 2

In light of the foregoing, while New Testament Studies is normally conceived as the set of literary objects (the artefactual remains of social interactions), phenomena, and practices that form the foundation for the development and emergence of early Christian traditions, the conjunction of New Testament *and* Early Christian Studies as understood above, actually inverts the relation such that what is conventionally understood to be denoted by “New Testament” is a product of early Christianity and not the source for it.

Thesis 3

Inverting the relation between New Testament and Early Christian Studies implies the concomitant emphasis on the materiality of the processes whereby early Christianity manifested – material text production, social reproduction processes, social formations, identity-making projects, mythmaking and the inventions of tradition (this includes the material processes of embodiment and cognition, affect and habitus – the affective and rule-conforming interaction with the world; the inscription of sociality on the body). Thus, the discourse of New Testament and Early Christian Studies encompasses an investigation of all the concrete operational sites of a given historical social formation’s sense of self – its self-understandings, its self-representations, and its self-reinscriptions; and the way in which these manifested in a range of interactional sites, a variety of institutions, conceived spaces, public texts and literary traditions. Viewed like this, New Testament and Early Christian Studies has a natural filial relationship to

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religious studies, as in itself, an exemplum, as broadly conceived case study of the wider field. As such, New Testament and Early Christian Studies is a natural companion to humanistic studies of society, culture, and politics (as “the political,” *la politique*, the sum total of human interactions), and is best seen as a human and social science.

Thesis 4

Understanding New Testament as nested in the broader Early Christian Studies is therefore to focus on traditions, trajectories, and the imagined continuities and connections over a longer period, rather than seeing periods, events, topics, texts and discourses as discrete objects for study. Implied is an emphasis on the plural: on trajectories, on formations, on identities, that is, on Christianities in the plural.

Thesis 5

Both elements of the phrase “New Testament and Early Christian Studies” are polyparadigmatic and multi- and interdisciplinary in their inner structure and operations. Early Christian Studies is an amalgam of the disciplines of Classics and Ancient History, Church History, Biblical Studies, Patristics, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, Religious Studies, Art History, and New Testament Theology. Further, Early Christian Studies as discipline also interweaves with fields like history, sociology, theory of literature, cultural studies, discourse analysis, archaeology, social sciences, anthropology, postcolonial theory. Similarly, New Testament Studies is equally a complex intersection of various fields: history, religious studies and history of religions, literature and theory of literature, rhetorics, cultural studies, gender studies, post- and decolonial studies, and so on. At any given moment, the research results, the discourses, theories, and conceptualities of any of the constituent fields of studies and disciplines, are in variable ratios present in New Testament and Early Christian Studies and make their impact on the practice of the discipline. The multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary character of the discipline New Testament and Early Christian Studies marks it as relentlessly self-reflexive, redescriptive, and as an interpretive analytic.

Thesis 6

New Testament and Early Christian Studies is related to the study of Christian origins in that similar theoretical frameworks, research questions, and topical/thematic foci occur in both. However, New Testament and Early Christian Studies does not only have a broader interest, but also is keyed differently due to the presence of the descriptor “New Testament.” The latter term evokes the element of authority that comes with the enshrinement of a set of literary texts and the rhetoric encoded in them as authoritative scripture. Even though, in the view of these theses on theory and method, the “New Testament” nests in early Christian studies, and as such is historicised as part of human processes of tradition and social formation, nevertheless the fact of the formation of authoritative scriptures in a process of canonisation (which process can in itself be historicised as instance of power and authority construction) grounds the relevance of New



Testament and Early Christian Studies for commentary on contemporary society and culture, and provides material to think with in pursuit of social activism and political agency.

Thesis 7

As New Testament and Early Christian Studies is conceived of as an interpretive analytic, the discipline is generally oriented to a Foucaultian archaeology of conceptualisation and a history of the present. As such it is open to contextual, gender and LGBTQI, post-imperial, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches. This means that, although the formative processes of early Christianities constitute the topical or thematic focus, *the performativity of the discourse of the discipline is geared towards the present*. New Testament and Early Christian Studies constitutes, then, one conceptual avenue into an engagement with the present.