

The Literate Education of Early Christians, and Some of Its Unintended Consequences for Christian Exegesis

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INTRODUCTION: THE LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION UNDER THE EARLY ROMAN PRINCIPATE

The landscape of education in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East around the time that Christianity emerged was very varied.¹ Most peo-

¹ This paper was delivered to the Swedish Exegetical Days 2022 at the University of Gothenburg, and warm thanks for the invitation are due to the Society's President and Committee. Earlier forms of parts of sections on the earliest Christian education and imitation of Christ appear in "Christian Instruction and Moral Formation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming) and "Not the Whole Story? Moralizing Biography and *Imitatio Christi*," in *Fame and Infamy: Essays for Christopher Pelling on Characterization in Greek and Roman Biography and History*, ed. Rhiannon Ash, Judith Mossman, and Frances B. Titchener (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 353–366. On the diversity of educational practices in this period see, for example, E. W. Heaton, *The School Tradition of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Yun Lee Too, ed., *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Eleanor Dickey, *The Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Laura Quick, "Recent Research on Ancient Israelite Education: A Bibliographic Essay," *CBR* 13 (2014): 9–33; George J. Brooke and Renate Smithuis, eds., *Jewish Education from*

ple will have learned a range of practical, everyday skills—spinning and weaving, cooking, childcare, farming, fishing, pottery, and smithing—by more or less formal demonstration, imitation, and apprenticeship. This kind of practical education was probably the earliest model for scribal education, which also seems to have taken the form of apprenticeship. Scribal education is often, rightly, thought of as producing accomplished literates, who could take high political office, compose and comment on literary texts both religious and secular, and play a key part in the transmission of sophisticated cultures, but it could also equip people for more modest roles. Under the Roman principate, it has been estimated that as many as 20% of adult men, together with some women, may have needed at least the elements of literacy and numeracy to run a business, act as a secretary or accountant (freelance, or within a wealthy household), or staff the large and growing imperial bureaucracy at every level from the village to the court.² Graeco-Roman Egypt has yielded some evidence of their (not necessarily very extensive) education, in the form of fragments of papyrus and ostraca on which a word, sentence, series of numbers, or signature has been neatly written at the top, followed by several attempts to imitate it.³

From the early Hellenistic period onwards, in the Greek and Roman worlds, a further form of literacy-based education developed which came to be known as *enkyklios paideia*, “ordinary” or “general” educa-

Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Philip S. Alexander (Leiden: Brill, 2017); William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), and below, n. 8.

² Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–25; Greg Woolf, “Ancient Illiteracy?” *BICS* 58 (2015): 31–42.

³ For example Herbert C. Youtie, “Pétaus, fils de Pétaus, ou le scribe qui ne savait pas écrire,” *CdE* 81 (1966): 127–143; idem, “*Bradeôs graphon*: Between Literacy and Illiteracy,” *GRBS* 12 (1971): 239–261. There is, separately, evidence for foreign language learning in this period which is less relevant here.

tion, or “literate education.”⁴ *Enkyklios paideia* began, like scribal education, with students, normally children, learning to read and copy individual letters and numbers, syllables, words, and short sentences. They then graduated to simple arithmetic and to reading longer passages of Greek or Latin verse and prose: especially Homer or Virgil, Euripides and Menander or Terence, fables, and passages from well known historians and orators. Some of these sentences or passages were moralistic or concerned the gods, so religious and moral attitudes were communicated, explicitly or implicitly, alongside other forms of cultural knowledge and technical skills. If their parents could afford it, students might graduate from these basics to learn some geometry and grammar: not the grammar of the spoken Greek or Latin of the time, but that of classical Attic or golden-age Latin. Those whose parents were sufficiently wealthy might then study rhetoric, literary criticism, philosophy, more sophisticated mathematics, and/or music with elite rhetoricians, philosophers, and other scholars.⁵

Enkyklios paideia developed out of aspects of classical Athenian education in the kingdoms which succeeded the empire of Alexander the Great, both because Alexander and his successors admired Athenian culture and as a tool of imperial control. It had practical uses: through it non-Macedonians and non-Greeks could acquire skills which enabled them to join the ruling bureaucracies of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Equally significantly, it became a tool of cultural initiation and social mobility at a time when identity was coming increasingly to be identified in socio-economic and cultural terms.⁶ By the later Hellenistic peri-

⁴ Morgan, *Literate Education*. On the roots of this education in classical Athens see idem, “Literate Education in Classical Athens,” *CQ* 49 (1999): 46–61.

⁵ At many levels of society boys will probably also have taken part in some athletic and military training: for example Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 116–132; Nigel Kennell, *Ephebeia: A Register of Greek Cities with Citizen Training Systems in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 2006).

⁶ Per Bilde, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Lise Hannestad, and Jan Zahle, eds., *Ethnicity*

od *enkyklios paideia* constituted a well developed curriculum of subjects with a culturally high profile. It was a recognized part of the social equipment of a wealthy or upper-class Greek or Roman, or someone who aspired to enter those elites, or to look something like a member of them.⁷

At the time when Christianity arose, the educational scene across the Mediterranean and Near East was therefore richly diverse. In this context, however, the written remains of early Christianity raise a number of questions. What kind of education did the writers of the earliest Christian texts have? How did Christians in early churches learn about their faith?

THE EDUCATION OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Probably all the earliest Christian writers were Jewish, but those who survive wrote in Greek. Some may also have spoken or read at least some Aramaic and/or Hebrew, but there is little sign that most, if any read the scriptures in Hebrew; their bible of reference was the Septu-

in Hellenistic Egypt (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1992); Richard Fowler, "Ethnicity and Power: Studies in Royal Ideology in the Hellenistic Fertile Crescent" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1999); Andrew Gardner, Edward Herring, and Kathryn Lomas, eds., *Creating Ethnicities and Identities in the Roman World* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2013); Teresa Morgan "Society, Identity and Ethnicity in the Hellenistic World," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David G. Horrell and Katherine M. Hockey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 23–45.

⁷The wide distribution, high profile and stability of *enkyklios paideia* are remarkable given its limited institutional support: without training or accreditation of teachers, school buildings, an examination system, or public funding for more than a small number of elite orators and philosophers. Children of the wealthy were taught by slaves. The less wealthy found a teacher at the local gymnasium, in the marketplace, or at a crossroads. If a person could recruit pupils he or she was a teacher, though such teachers were not always highly regarded: one Greek proverb says, "He's either dead or teaching letters" (Zen. 4.17).

agint. It seems clear that they had some form of education in Greek, and perhaps only in Greek. This obviously involved literacy and was much more than elementary, since it enabled them to write sizeable works of history, biography, letters, teaching treatises, and apocalypses. The most widespread and obvious source of literate education in Greek at this time was *enkyklios paideia*, but there are difficulties in assuming that this was what early Christians received. *Enkyklios paideia* teaches more advanced students to read and write a grammatically and syntactically complex Greek informed by classical Attic, but early Christians write various, more or less sophisticated but confident, forms of *koinē*, the simplified everyday Greek of their own time. Written *koinē* and contemporary literary Greek are on a spectrum, and neither is identical to classical Attic, but, compared, for instance, with near-contemporaries such as Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, Philo, or Josephus, the first Christian writers do not look as though they have received a high level mainstream literate education. Could they have received such an education but be switching to *koinē* to make their writings more accessible to their audiences, some of whom may not have had much education? This may be possible in principle, but Christians living in cities, at least, around the ancient Mediterranean were used to hearing public speeches by the highly educated, and much of the communication of early Christian writings is likely to have taken place orally. If so, there would have been no obvious need for writers to “write down” to their audiences.

An alternative candidate for the education of early Christians is a form of Jewish scribal education, conducted in Greek. The existence of such a tradition has been inferred not least from the number of substantial Hellenistic Jewish writings that survive, written, like early Christian writings, in lively and confident *koinē* Greek. Unfortunately we have surprisingly little evidence for Hellenistic Jewish education, so it cannot be proven.⁸ We do, however, have a little evidence for education within

⁸ See especially Jason Zurawski, “Jewish education the Hellenistic Diaspora: Discussing Education, Shaping Identity” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016);

Christian communities of the very late first and early second centuries, in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. This has been largely overlooked in the study of education, and it by no means tells us all we should like to know, but it offers a shred of testimony to the education of early Christians. In the process it may also shed some light on the education of the earliest Christian writers, and perhaps also of Greek-speaking Jews.

THE EARLIEST “CHRISTIAN EDUCATION”

The earliest reference to “Christian education” appears in the First Letter of Clement, plausibly written around the end of the first century in the name of “the church of God ... in Rome” to “the church of God ... in Corinth.” At 21.6 and 21.8, the writer exhorts the Corinthians, “Let us teach the young [or ‘new members’] the *paideia* of the fear of God ... let our children share the teaching ‘in Christ.’” The first *paideia* here could refer to an education whose content is the fear of God, or an education appropriate to those who fear God, but in context the first is more likely. The writer is telling the community how to be “citizens worthy of [God]” (21.1): among other things, by doing God’s will, revering Christ, instructing the young and possibly also adult converts, and regulating their wives for good (21.4, 6).⁹ The second reference to *paideia* probably also refers to the content of this education, which, the writer tells us immediately afterwards, includes humility, love of God, and the recognition that fear and love of God bring salvation (21.8).¹⁰

Karina M. Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman, eds., *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017); Jason M. Zurawski and Gabriele Boccaccini, eds., *Second Temple Jewish “Paideia” in Context* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017); Patrick Pouchelle, “The Septuagintal Paideia and the Construction of a Jewish Identity during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Period,” *CBQ* 81 (2019): 33–45.

⁹ This indicates that male householders are the primary addressees of the letter, and responsible for education within their households.

¹⁰ The meaning of the phrase “in Christ” is much debated, but here its meaning is

For this writer, and all the Apostolic Fathers, the ultimate teacher is God, through God's commandments, the Jewish scriptures, God's sending of Jesus Christ to earth, and Jesus' earthly teaching (for example, 1 Clem. 2.8; 2 Clem. 13.4; Poly., *Phil.* 2.2; Did. 1.2; Barn. 1.2; Herm. Vis. 1.3.4; cf. Diog. 7.2–6).¹¹ In early Christian writings, it is very rare for the exalted Christ to teach, though the risen Christ does instruct the disciples in the gospels and Acts (Matt 28:19; Luke 24:25–28, 44–47; Acts 1:2–3; cf. Joh 21:15–17), and there may be a hint of the exalted Christ's teaching at 1 Clem. 22.1. During his earthly life, however, Jesus both teaches and instructs by example, as he bears his sufferings with faithfulness and humility (1 Clem. 16.3–7; Ign. *Rom.* 6.3; Poly. *Phil.* 10.1; Mart. *Poly.* 1.2).¹²

After God and Christ, the chief educators of the faithful are the apostles. The writer of the Letter to Diognetus refers to the apostles as his own teachers: “having become a disciple of the apostles, I am becoming a teacher of the nations ...” (11.1), and rejoices that, through Christ and through people like himself, what the apostles handed down to later generations is well guarded (11.6). Bishops, presbyters, and deacons also teach Christian householders, who pass the teaching on to their dependents (e.g. Did. 4.9; Herm. Vis. 1.3.1). For Polycarp of Smyrna and the writer of the Letter to Diognetus, community members also teach each other, by the example of their faithfulness, righteousness,

probably instrumental (cf. 1 Clem. 2.1, 49.1). See further Teresa Morgan, *Being “In Christ” in the Letters of Paul: Saved through Christ and In His Hands* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 254–255.

¹¹ Peter Gemeinhardt, “Teaching the Faith in Early Christianity: Divine and Human Agency,” *VC* 74 (2020): 129–164.

¹² On Jesus as teaching in his earthly ministry in the Apostolic Fathers see, for example, 1 Clem. 13.1–2; 2 Clem. 6.1; Ign., *Eph.* 9.2; Poly., *Phil.* 2.2–3; and probably 1 Clem. 49.1; Barn. 5.7–8). They also quote or refer to teachings by Jesus which appear in the canonical gospels (e.g. 1 Clem. 24.5; 2 Clem. 3.1; Ign., *Eph.* 14.2; Ign., *Rom.* 7.3; Poly. *Phil.* 5.2; Did. 11.7; Barn. 5.9; Herm. Vis. 4.2.6; Mand. 6.2.4; Sim. 6.3.6; Sim. 9.20.2; Diogn. 9.6).

and endurance in suffering (Poly. *Phil.* 9.1–2; Diogn. 5.10–16; cf. 1 Thess 1:7). All community members are also learners, with a responsibility to listen to their teachers, to recognize their sins, and to imitate Christ and the longsuffering of fellow Christians, especially under persecution.¹³ No distinction is made in these texts between what is taught to children and adults, perhaps because at this time so many of those who need to be taught about Christ-confession are adult converts. It is not clear where or in what contexts teaching takes place, but, just as Jesus is remembered as teaching in synagogues on the Sabbath, in private houses, and in the open air, we can conjecture that his early followers also taught both in liturgical contexts and in informal domestic or open-air meetings.

These glimpses of early Christian education focus on its ultimate sources of authority—God and Christ—on those who transmit it—especially apostles, community leaders, and householders—and on its content—interpretation of the scriptures, the teaching of Jesus in his earthly life, imitation of Christ and other faithful people, and what the faithful ultimately hope for. It is evident that education is firmly embedded in the organizing structures and practices of communities, and directly supports those structures and practices. Disappointingly, the Apostolic Fathers have little to say about the media in which, for instance, the teaching of Jesus is preserved in their communities, though at this point both oral traditions and texts are in circulation among churches. Their picture of education has some points of contact with *enkyklios paideia* (for instance, in its interest in moral formation) but its authority structure, content, and aims, and its lack of explicit interest in literacy, are all significantly different.¹⁴ In its understanding of education

¹³ Jason N. Yuh, “Do as I Say, Not as They Do: Social Construction in the Epistle of Barnabas through Canonical Interpretation and Ritual,” *HTR* 112 (2019): 273–295, notes that Barnabas’ audience are responsible for understanding what they are taught, by the “circumcision of hearing” (Barn. 9.1–3).

¹⁴ It also has parallels with traditional Roman moral formation of children, paradigmatically described in Plutarch’s life of Cato the Elder (20); on the role of

as coming from God, however, as involving interpretation of the Jewish scriptures, as transmitted by figures of authority within the community, as directed primarily at householders who teach and regulate other members of their households, and as aimed explicitly at the good of the whole community in its life of service to God, the Apostolic Fathers' picture of education is strongly reminiscent of that of the Hellenistic Jewish books of wisdom. We can, I think, infer with some confidence that early Christian education derives from a probably Greek-speaking, scribal-type Hellenistic Jewish educational tradition. This further suggests that the Apostolic Fathers offer some evidence of Hellenistic Jewish educational practices, and probably also of the education of the earliest Christian writers.

What the references above do not yield is any evidence of how, practically, reading and writing were taught, but there may be a shred of information about this too. As early as the end of the first century, the *Didache* describes how teachers sometimes arrive in a Christian community from outside. The writer tells its community to receive such people, but warily, testing them, and recognizing that there are false teachers as there are false prophets (11.1–2; cf. 6.1; 12.1). False teachers, or teachings from outside, may refer to teaching from other Christian groups with which this writer does not agree: the kind of thing Paul refers to when he tells the Corinthians or the Galatians not to be led astray by people who preach something different from him (1 Cor 3:1–11; Gal 3:1–2; 4:8–9). The *Didache*, however, has a strongly dualist world view. There are two paths, of life and death, good and evil, and those whom the writer associates with evil are normally absolute outsiders: non-Christians. Teachers from outside—who, among other things, teach about morality and the divine—could therefore be non-Christians, and if so, the likeliest candidates are teachers of *enkyklios*

parents in education more broadly see Janette McWilliam, "The Socialization of Roman Children," in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 264–285 (269–274).

paideia, some of the content of whose teaching had a religious and moralizing dimension. If so, then the writer of the Didache may be warning his community not to have anything to do with this type of education and its profane and immoral content—a concern which will become a major bigger issue for Christians in the following centuries.¹⁵ This reinforces the likelihood that if Christians were taught to read and write, it was in the other tradition readily available to them, that of Hellenistic Judaism.

The earliest Christian teaching must have been oral proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, together with interpretation of its significance, affirmation of Christ's exaltation and lordship and his future coming, the call to repentance and baptism, and transmission of teachings of Jesus in his earthly life. At a very early stage, this teaching began to be written down and further interpreted; it was built into larger works such as gospels and *acta*, and was taught by community leaders one of whose prime responsibilities was education. For this kind of development of teaching and writings, education in a scribal tradition would serve well. *Enkyklios paideia* would undoubtedly have been a presence in the places where Christian communities developed, and no doubt some converts had received a literate education, but it may have remained marginal to early Christian communities, and may even have been perceived as more of a threat than an opportunity.

IMITATION OF CHRIST AS CENTRAL TO EARLY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

This sketch of very early Christian education has touched on one aspect of it which is well attested in early writings, and which deserves a little more attention in its own right: imitation, especially imitation of Christ.

¹⁵ When Ign. *Magn.* 8.10 urges the Magnesians similarly not to be led astray by false teachings, nor by "useless old fables", it is referring to the Mosaic law, but the Didache is unlikely to be referring to Jewish teaching in hostile terms.

The call to imitation of Christ is deeply rooted in early Christian thinking; it appears in some of Paul's earliest letters (1 Thess 1:6; 1 Cor 11:1) and is remembered as being taught by Jesus himself in his earthly life (for example Luke 22:26–27; Joh 15:9, 12–14). The idea that one learns by imitating—by conforming one's intentions and/or actions to an end modelled by another—is also endemic in all kinds of contemporary Mediterranean and Near Eastern education, as well as in popular and philosophical ethics, so it comes as no surprise to find that it is invoked by Christians. The way Christians are called to imitate Christ, however, is distinctive. A few examples will have to suffice here.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper (Luk 22:26–27), Jesus tells the disciples to follow his example by serving one another. It has been suggested that the whole of Luke's passion narrative portrays Jesus as a model for imitation, especially by early Christian martyrs.¹⁶ John's Jesus also calls the disciples to imitate him: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Joh 15:12–14).¹⁷ Following Jesus means following his example of love, and the ultimate expression of love is to be willing to die for others. In these examples, the disciples are told specifically to imitate Jesus' willingness to suffer and die for others. In the synoptic gospels and Acts, a handful of other activities of Jesus are also identified as models for imitation: in the gospels, for instance, the disciples are sent out to exorcize unclean spirits, heal the sick, and preach the gospel (Mark 3:14–15; 6:7 = Matt 10:1–16 = Luke 9:1–5), and in Acts we see them doing so. Where imitation is referenced in the

¹⁶ For example Brian E. Beck, "Imitatio Christi and the Lucan Passion Narrative," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28–47; cf. G. W. H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and Inspiration," in Horbury and McNeil, *Suffering*, 118–135; Jon Ruthven, "The 'Imitation of Christ' in Christian Tradition: Its Missing Charismatic Emphasis," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 8 (2000), 60–78.

¹⁷ Translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

gospels, however, it is most often (though not quite always) imitation of Christ in his suffering or death.

The same is true of Paul's letters. At 1 Thess 1:6–7, for example, Paul tells the Thessalonians,

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example (*typos*) to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The Thessalonians' "affliction" seems to be that they have been attacked in some way for putting their trust in God (1:8) At 2:14 Paul adds that they have become imitators of the churches of Judaea, "for you suffered the same things from your compatriots as they did from the Jews." These verses are sometimes taken to mean that the Thessalonians can console themselves by remembering that Christ, Paul, and other churches have suffered as they are suffering, but this cannot be quite right. The suffering of the Thessalonians is not like that of Christ, since there is no indication that it has led to arrest or death, and it is not salvific. Nor is there any indication that they are suffering, like Paul, because they are apostles. At the same time, the phrase, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord" hints that the Thessalonians' suffering, whatever it consists in, does achieve something, and Paul indicates that it inspires others to trust and faithfulness towards God.

Ephesians 5:1–2 also encourages imitation, of both Christ and God-self, even if it leads to suffering, and indicates that such suffering achieves something: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." The writer urges the Ephesians to imitate God by forgiving others as God has forgiven them through the death of Christ (5:2, cf. 1:7), and to imitate Christ by loving others as Christ loved them, even to death (though there is no indication that he expects the Ephesians to seek death). In a similar spirit, while instructing Christian slaves to obey their masters, the author of 1 Peter asks rhetorically what credit there is in being beaten for doing wrong.

None, he says, but it is a grace before God to endure suffering patiently for doing good:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his footsteps ... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness." (1 Pet 2:21, 23–24)

Once more, imitating Christ is connected not with the whole of Christ's life, but with his suffering and death, and the writer hints that imitating him, in some unspecified way, strengthens the righteousness of the faithful.

The "Christ-hymn" at Phil 2:6–11 offers Christ as a model in slightly more oblique terms. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus:" the "mind" that led Christ to empty himself, take the form of a slave, humble himself, and become obedient even to death on a cross. As many commentators have argued, this would be a roundabout way of telling the Philippians simply to practice humility and obedience to God, but it can be heard as inviting them to identify with, and model their lives on, the kenotic humility and death of Christ.¹⁸

Passages like these are by no means the only ones in which early writers commend to community members activities which they associate with Jesus in his earthly life. At 1 Cor 12:8–10, for instance, Paul tells the Corinthians that they are, or should be, capable of healing, do-

¹⁸ Following, for example, Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2.5–11* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1928), 91; Stephen E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), chapters 3–4. On the conflicted history of interpretation of this passage, however, see Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii 5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); idem, "Carmen Christi revisited," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. idem and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 1–5.

ing mighty deeds, prophesying, discerning spirits, and more. In Acts, Peter, Paul, Stephen and others follow the example of Jesus by preaching, prophesying, healing, and being directed or even taken to one place or another where they are needed (for example Acts 2:17; 6:10; 8:39; 11:28; 13:4; 19:6). All the Apostolic Fathers, by virtue of their writings, construct themselves as teachers, and sometimes describe themselves as such (for example *Ep. Diog.* 11.6; *Herm.* 2.4.3), as well as exhorting community leaders, by virtue of their office, teachers, by virtue of their spiritual gift, or all the faithful, by virtue of their faith, to teach others. But these activities are not typically described as ways of imitating Christ: rather they are gifts or expressions of the Spirit, or responsibilities of community membership or office (for example Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:28–31; 14:1–2; 1 Thess 5:19–20; cf. Eph 4:11). When early writers speak of people imitating or following Christ, it is almost always in connection with Christ's suffering and death.

We could multiply examples, but the importance of imitating Christ for early Christians is well recognized. It is, however, less well recognized that early Christian imitation, in some ways, takes a significantly different form from the imitation of moral exemplars in the world around it.

Imitation is a major theme in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern culture and education, while in mainstream Greek and Roman education children read exemplary stories of great men and (occasionally) women of the past from an early stage.¹⁹ In this context, imitation typi-

¹⁹ Christopher Pelling, "Aspects of Plutarch's Characterization," *ICS* 13 (1988): 257–274; idem, "The Moralism of Plutarch's Lives," in *Ethics and Rhetoric: Classical Essays for Donald Russell on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Doreen C. Innes, Harry Hine, and Christopher Pelling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 205–220; Timothy E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13–51; Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122–129; Rebecca Langlands, *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Matthew Roller, *Models from the Past in Roman Culture: A World of Exempla* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

cally takes one of two forms: either one imitates the behaviour of a role model, or, more generically, one imitates his or her virtue in a way appropriate to one's own context. One might, for example, aspire to imitate the behaviour of the fabled early Republican Roman soldier Horatius Cocles if Rome should one day need defending again from an invader. Alternatively, one might seek to imitate the courage of Alexander the Great without aiming to invade a neighbouring kingdom.

When Christians, however, are urged to imitate the faithfulness of Christ in suffering, or even death, their suffering is not an action, nor is it commended as a virtue. Christians might be willing to accept suffering, but they are not usually told that it is an intrinsically good thing, that they should seek it out, or that it should take any particular form.²⁰ Imitation of Christ is better understood as a willingness to accept the consequences of the commitment a Christian has made to God and Christ, in the conviction that, however apparently negative, these are ultimately positive—not just for oneself, but also for others.²¹

One of the implications of this understanding of imitation, for Christians, is that it commits those who practise it not only to practising a virtue or to a specific action, but to a continuous path of action. A path of action informed by an intellectual or moral commitment is the beginning of what Christians, together with some early imperial philosophers, call a *hodos* or “way,” and following a way begins to create a way of life and an ongoing identity for the person who follows it. The idea that followers of Christ imitate Christ is therefore inseparable from the conviction that Christian *pistis* (“trust,” “belief,” or “faith” in God and Christ) is not just a set of beliefs, a collection of moral ideas, or even worship of a divinity, but an entire way of life, in community with others who share it, which the faithful follow until the end time. Imitation of Christ is one of the most powerful of the ideas that represent

²⁰ Though occasionally early Christians did express a desire for martyrdom: for example Ign. *Rom.* 6.3; cf. 2.2; Tert. *Scap.* 5; Isidore, *Orig.* 8.5.51.

²¹ Morgan, “Not the whole story?,” 364–365.

early Christ-confession to its adherents not just as a new set of concepts or a new cult, but as a rebirth; a new creation; life already lived under the kingdom of God; or an aspect of eternal life already active in the present time.

The idea that a person might be willing to embrace the consequences of a commitment she or he has made is not unique to Christians. One might point to Abraham's obedience when he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac; Socrates' refusal to flee Athens in 399 BCE to escape execution under the laws of his city; or the (probably apocryphal) determination of the Roman general Regulus to return to Carthage, from where he has been sent to Rome as a hostage-negotiator for peace in 255 BCE, to tell the Carthaginians in person that Rome refuses to accept their terms, and face execution. Stories like these are told not only for the virtues of their subjects, but for their exemplary determination to accept the situations into which their religious, moral, or patriotic commitments has led them. Christians, however, take this idea and make it central to Christ-confession and, in the process, to Christian education, in a way which is new.

SOME UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

So far, we have sought to recover some under-used evidence for very early Christian education, and to locate it, as far as possible, in its Graeco-Roman and Jewish contexts. By the mid-second century, however, we can begin to say much more about the education of Christians, because an increasing number (most, at first, converts, but more and more cradle Christians too) have a high-level education based on *enkyklios paideia* and also encompassing rhetoric, literary criticism, and/or philosophy.²² This, as is well recognized, makes possible the great efflorescence

²² On the interaction of late antique Christian with mainstream education see, for example, Sara Rappé, "The New Math: How to Add and Subtract Pagan Elements in

of later ancient Christian philosophy, theology, apologetic, and scriptural interpretation, together with hymns, poetry, complex sermons, liturgies, and more. By way of a coda to this article, however, it is worth drawing attention to some of the unintended consequences of this development in the education of (some) Christians, for the ways in which their own tradition and earliest writings are heard and interpreted.²³

One of the effects, and almost certainly intentions, of Greek and Latin literate education, from its inception, was to encourage those who received it to identify with Greek and/or Roman culture, often to the point of embracing the expansion or redefinition of their ethnicity and social identity on the basis of that culture. The debate about the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian education which reached its height in the fourth century attests that educated Christians were as susceptible as non-Christians to the effects of education on their identity, and aware of it as an issue, even if not everyone had nightmares, like Jerome, about being condemned by Christ as a Ciceronian rather than a Christian.²⁴ The culture one acquired through *enkyklios paideia*, rhetoric, philosophy, and the rest, moreover, was not only literate, but deeply literary. We should expect educated Christians influ-

Christian Education,” in Lee Too, *Education*, 405–532; Peter Gemeinhardt, “In Search of Christian *paideia*: Education and Conversion in Early Christian Biography,” *ZAC* 16 (2012): 88–98, Carolyn Osiek, “The Education of Girls in Early Christian Ascetic Tradition,” *Studies in Religion* 41 (2012): 401–407; Matthew Ryan Hauge and Andrew W. Pitts, *Ancient Education and Early Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

²³ We should not overdraw the contrast between Hellenistic Jewish and Greek-type educations here, given that by the early principate there had been extensive cross-fertilization between Jewish and Greek literate cultures. The most influential Christian writers of the second century on, however, clearly have a much higher-level Greek education than most, or all, first-century writers, while the Hellenistic Jewish traditions in which first-century writers were probably educated are very unlikely normally to have reached the cultural heights of, for example, Philo or Josephus.

²⁴ *Ep.* 22.30: “Asked who and what I was I replied: ‘I am a Christian.’ But He who presided said: ‘You lie, you are a follower of Cicero, not of Christ. For “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.””

enced by it to have had a tendency to identify their Christian identity and faith particularly strongly with the authority of written texts, and they do.

By the early principate, moreover, Greek literature and, increasingly, Latin literature, had developed canons: lists of the most significant authors within the repertoire of all significant, remembered authors.²⁵ The canon of Greek literature began to develop in the early Hellenistic period and was closely linked with the evolution of *enkyklios paideia*. *Enkyklios paideia* heavily favoured canonical texts as teaching aids because it was designed, in part, to teach the young what it was most important for them to know if they aspired to belong to the ranks of the culturally and socially Greek. Some Christians were increasingly encouraged, probably not least by their literate education, not only to link their Christian identity with texts, but to link it especially with a selection of what they saw as the most significant texts, and so gradually to form the Christian canon (the same process had already begun with Jewish texts, very likely, at least in part, because of a similarly close relationship between Hellenistic Jewish and Greek literate culture). One unintended consequence of this was Christianity's eventual privileging of "canonical" writings over other writings or forms of communication as definitive of the content of "the faith" and what it means to be a Christian. A further consequence is the reading of canonical writings in distinctive ways: notably for traces of later doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, which, it was felt, ought to be at least adumbrated in some form in the scriptures because they became important later. Finding later

²⁵ The development of the canon is attributed to Aristarchus of Samothrace and Aristobulus of Alexandria, librarians of the Alexandrian library, though the process began earlier, with the privileging of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* over other epics from the late archaic period, and the identification of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as the three great tragedians of fifth-century Athens from the fourth century onwards. Within the canon, educational writings further privileged some writers—Homer, Euripides, Menander—and some works over others, creating, effectively, a canon within the canon, a tendency which is also evident in early Christian writings.

ideas in canonical texts is a longstanding practice of Greek literary criticism and textual commentary: it was, for instance, a commonplace of literary discourse that one could find everything one needed to know in Homer's *Iliad*, from how to build a boat to the doctrines of later Platonism.²⁶

The high-level education of some Christians, from the mid-second century onwards, also encouraged them to read what they regarded as their most significant early texts in ways inherited from the study of canonical Greek literature. In this passage, for example, Origen uses allegorical interpretation to read Matthew's parable of the treasure hidden in a field (Matt 13:44) as affirming his view that there is secret wisdom in the scriptures and in the person of Christ which is not accessible to ordinary, uneducated Christians, and should be kept from them:

Now a man who comes to the field, whether to the Scriptures or to the Christ who is formed both from things manifest and from things hidden, finds the hidden treasure of wisdom whether in Christ or in the Scriptures. For, going round to visit the field and searching the Scriptures and seeking to understand the Christ, he finds the treasure in it. Having found it, he hides it, thinking that it is not without danger to reveal to everybody the secret meanings of the Scriptures or the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ. And, having hidden it, he goes away. Now he is focused on the heavy labor of devising how he shall buy the field, or the Scriptures, that he may make them his own possession, receiving from the people of God the oracles of God with which the Jews were first entrusted.²⁷

In an even more elaborate reading of Matthew's parable of the leaven (Matt 13:35), Hilary of Poitiers interprets every element in the parable allegorically to argue that the teaching of the law and the prophets are

²⁶ For example Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of an Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), John J. Keane and Robert Lamberton, *Homer's Ancient Readers: The Hermeneutics of Greek Epic's Earliest Exegetes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

²⁷ Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), ad loc.

completed by the gospel and brought into unity through the Holy Spirit:

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven. Yeast comes from flour and returns the potency it received to the batch of its own kind. The Lord compared himself with this yeast. It was taken in hand by the woman, that is, the synagogue, and buried with the judgment of death, affirming that the law and the prophets are dissolved in the gospel. This yeast, covered with three measures of flour in equal parts—that is the law, the prophets and the gospel—makes everything one, so that what the law established and the prophets proclaimed is completed by the added ingredient of the gospel. Everything, possessing the same contents and potency, is brought about through the spirit of God, so that there is no disunity in what is fermented in equal parts.²⁸

Readings like these, among much else, look for a density and complexity of argument which go beyond anything Matthew is likely to have intended, or his first listeners to have heard, but which are firmly in the tradition of the allegorical interpretation of poetry by Greek literary scholars and philosophers.

At times, even the literary Greek which educated Christians had learned may have affected their interpretation of the texts. Luke 17:21b, for example, “Behold, the kingdom of God is ἐντός ὑμῶν,” offers a notorious interpretative crux. In classical Greek, ἐντός can mean “within” or “among,” suggesting to most late antique and modern commentators that the kingdom of God is either within the disciples or among them. For Ambrose’s *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (8.33), Isaac of Nineveh’s *Ascetical Homilies* (53), and John Cassian’s *Conferences* (1.13), for instance, it is within them. This interpretation has held sway for much of the Church’s history, though the “among” translation has been preferred by those who identify the kingdom with the presence of Christ in the Church, or who see Luke’s gospel as much concerned with Christian community and care for the socially vulnerable.²⁹ In 1948, however,

²⁸ Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, ad loc.

²⁹ See the discussion of François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:50–19:27* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), ad loc.

C. H. Roberts demonstrated that in early imperial papyri written in *koinē*, ἐντός often means “near at hand” or “within your grasp.”³⁰ If early Christian writers had read the gospels with the Greek of their own day in mind, rather than the literary Attic of several centuries earlier, this interpretation might have entered the mainstream of interpretation much earlier.³¹

In very varied ways, therefore, the ways in which early Christians were educated affected what and how they wrote, and how they evaluated, read, and interpreted earlier writings. In the process, they shaped Christian understandings about the nature of tradition, which parts and forms of tradition were most significant, and what was significant about them, in ways that persist to the present day. Should we see this as problematic? It depends on what we are trying to do by studying early Christianity. Historians are interested in what the authors of written sources were trying to say, and how they were heard by their first audiences, while theologians are more interested in the accumulation of tradition and in interpretations. In addition, of course, contemporary practices of history are themselves the product of a tradition and make what are effectively confessional assumptions and claims about the nature of human beings and human societies, so no approach to the material is objective or value-neutral. At the very least, however, understanding something of how Christian education evolved as part of Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture and traditions, and how its background shaped its relationship with the form and content of Christian tradition, allows modern scholars to make better informed decisions about how they read and interpret the tradition at every stage, whether as historians, literary scholars, linguists, theologians, or people of faith.

³⁰ C. H. Roberts, “The Kingdom of Heaven,” *HTHR* 41 (1948): 1–8. (Gos. Thom. 3, rephrases this saying, “The kingdom is inside you and it is outside you,” partly in line with this writing’s emphasis on interiority).

³¹ Though Cyril of Alexandria, in his commentary on Luke, *Homily* 117 (Migne, *PG* 52, 841) comes close to a *koinē* interpretation when he says, “It is within you: that is, it depends on your own wills and is in your own power, whether or not you receive it.”