**Reviewing Mack's Re-Visioning:
A "Review Symposium" on Burton L. Mack's *A Myth of
Innocence***

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Because *Axis Mundi* has, to date, dedicated itself solely to publishing articles and not review essays, the publication of the following papers marks *Axis Mundi*'s review publishing "debut." This "review symposium" on Burton L. Mack's *A Myth of Innocence* is therefore something of a milestone for the journal. It is also an exciting occasion for scholars such as myself, whose research interests primarily revolve around the field of Christian origins, because the publication of this book in 1988 was a milestone in the establishment of our field. In a time when most students of early Christianity were occupied with hermeneutical studies of the New Testament, trying to decipher the texts and make them relevant for contemporary theological insight, Mack was a pioneer, treating the texts not as material for exegesis but as "artifacts" from prior communities engaged in social formation and rhetorical representation. Mack viewed these textual representations as "identity markers" by which groups of early Christians defined themselves in the hectic social economies of the Hellenistic world. In this way, he helped establish a distinctly North American style of biblical studies, which many now designate as the study of "Christian

origins,” in contradistinction to the more traditional field of “New Testament studies.”

The gap between the two disciplines has only widened in recent years. “New Testament” scholars continue to define their work as the study of early Christian texts as *texts*—that is, New Testament scholars often perceive the study of the texts as an end unto itself. These scholars occupy themselves with reading the texts and teasing out the details of their structure, often with an eye to developing a “reading” that has relevance to contemporary cultural or theological concerns. In such studies, attention is normally paid to the social context in which the text was written only insofar as such attention to context will aid in understanding what the text itself is “saying.”

Scholars of “Christian origins,” on the other hand, tend to study these same texts as *artifacts* from past communities, using social theory to attempt to describe the communities behind these texts and account for their emergence. In such studies, attention to social context is paramount, as scholars of Christian origins attempt to understand the early Christian writings as textual responses to the social realities of the Hellenistic period. Here, exegesis is subordinate to context; the texts are interpreted only insofar as they will aid the scholar in understanding how the early Christians responded to the social conditions in which they found themselves. The questions scholars of Christian origins ask are not “What does the text mean?” or “How is this relevant to ‘us’ today?” but rather, “Why was this text written in such a context? Why was it rhetorically

efficacious for these Christians textually to represent themselves in this way? What was the 'attraction' of such a representation?" and so on. Again, it is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which Mack's work, in *A Myth of Innocence* and beyond, has influenced the field of Christian origins. Mack has shown many scholars, myself included, just how to "do it."¹ For this reason, among others, I believe *Myth* is very deserving of this review symposium, and am honored to write this introduction on behalf of *Axis Mundi*.

The following papers were first written in partial completion of the requirements for Dr. Willi Braun's "Introduction to Early Christian Writings" course at the University of Alberta, in Winter 2006. Though all written by undergraduates, these papers demonstrate a clarity of understanding and depth of insight into Mack's project that is quite impressive. All present careful readings of Mack's text, from various angles, and do an exemplary job of both presenting his work as clearly as possible and critically responding to it. In this regard, I do not think it is exaggeration to say the papers easily match, and in some cases may

¹ In fact, if the reader will indulge me a short bio-bibliographical anecdote, I will share that it was Mack's essay "On Redescribing Christian Origins," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8.3 (1996), 247-69, which first piqued my interest in pursuing the study of Christian origins. In what may be his most concise presentation of the topic, Mack carefully and clearly lays out the reasons for entertaining a shift from "New Testament" research to research on "Christian Origins." This essay has been reprinted, with revisions, in his *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 59-80. This paper was presented to the Society of Biblical Literature's Consultation on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian origins, which took up Mack's project explicitly in the later Seminar on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins. The first volume (of a projected three) of these proceedings is now available in Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (eds.), *Redescribing Christian Origins* (SBL Symposium Series 28; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

surpass, the quality of many previously published reviews of *A Myth of Innocence*.

But hindsight, as they say, is always 20/20, and these young scholars all had the luxury of access to previous reviews, which undoubtedly gave them the opportunity to correct many errors of their predecessors. They have apparently taken full advantage of this opportunity, as all of them make some attempt to situate Mack's text not only within the trajectory of scholarship that preceded it, but also within its "reception history" by other reviewers. Elizabeth Zutter, for instance, offers a thorough summary of Mack's work, and concludes with a review of the various objections to and criticisms of Mack's project. Zutter collects many of the most cogent critiques of Mack's reconstructions and research methods, such as Adela Yarbro Collins' critique of Mack's apparent assumption that there must have been a different community behind each different text. These critiques deserve attention, though it should be noted that some of the "weak points" in *Myth* have been subsequently addressed, both in Mack's later work and in the work of other scholars.

Suzanne Picard seems to focus less on the text of *A Myth of Innocence* itself and more upon the position of Mack's text within the discourse of historical-biblical scholarship. She draws attention to the theorists that seem to have influenced Mack the most: Foucault and Derrida for the interdisciplinarity and the methods of "sifting" through various textual strata, and Althusser for the social theory. She also highlights Mack's distinctive "voice" in the field of Christian

origins, where his “warfare mentality” has not always been well received. The strength of her paper is found in its forceful engagement with *A Myth of Innocence*, both in the text proper and in the “sub-text” of the footnotes. Taken together, these form a profound “conversation” with Mack’s text, which demonstrates both clear reading and critical reflection.

Greg Woolverton’s is the most distinctive of the three reviews, because it is, at first glance, not about *A Myth of Innocence* at all. However, as Woolverton shows in the course of his paper, he is actually highlighting the rhetorical techniques and discursive assumptions that allow Mack to write *A Myth of Innocence* in the first place, rather than present a summary of what Mack has written. He characterizes Mack’s method as a kind of “can(n)on criticism”—an ironic characterization that plays off the dual significance of “canon criticism” and “criticizing with a cannon.” I spy in the latter reading a veiled reference to the subtitle of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols: or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. I like this description of Mack’s work, as it highlights not only the *academic stakes* of *A Myth of Innocence* (i.e., if accepted, it requires scholars to read the texts of the New Testament in an entirely different way), but also the *political stakes* of the work (i.e., Mack intends his book to be an “intervention” into the scene of contemporary geo-politics).² Anyone who stops to consider how

² Scholarship as intervention has become an increasing topic within academic discourse, even in the field of New Testament studies. Taking its cue, perhaps, from Edward Said’s dictum, that “[w]e are at a point in our work when we can no longer ignore empires and the imperial context in our studies” (*Culture and Imperialism* [New York: Vintage Books, 1993], 6), a series of volumes

frequently Jesus makes an appearance in newspapers, magazines, and political speeches in North America will realize the possible political significance of Mack's work very quickly, and Woolverton takes some important "first steps" toward understanding Mack in this way.³

All of these reviews will contribute something to a reader's understanding of *A Myth of Innocence*. All of them will reward careful study—in fact, it might not be a bad idea to treat them as "companion pieces" to read along with *A Myth of Innocence*. Yet, none of the reviews attempt to situate *Myth* within the larger context of Mack's continuing work on Christian origins, and it is this contribution that I would like to make in the remainder of this introduction.

Perhaps the least understood, but (in my view) most important aspect of Burton Mack's career-long project is the rhetorical strategy by which he has used

edited by Richard A. Horsley has begun to address the profound relevance of the *Roman* imperial context of the letters of Paul. Horsley collects a wide selection of readings that draw the reader's attention to the resonance that Paul's language would have had with the language used to describe the Roman imperial cult, and builds an argument that Paul's gospel was an experiment in counter-imperialism. This argument, first proposed in Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), was furthered in *idem* (ed.), *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, imperium, interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), and *idem* (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004). The essays that comprise the *Paul and Politics* volume especially are addressed not only to the political implications of Paul's rhetoric within the Roman imperial context, but also to developing readings of Paul that are addressed to the concerns of our current, postcolonial context. In this regard, Horsley's edited volumes are similar to Mack's *Myth of Innocence*, in that both scholars intend their work as interventions into the contemporary political scene.

³ For another, more focused consideration of the political implications of Mack's work, see William E. Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus* (London: Equinox, 2005), esp. 47-55. Arnal examines the politics of how we remember "the past," or in this case, how we imagine the historical Jesus, and nicely demonstrates how these issues — such as the controversy surrounding Mack's allegedly "non-Jewish" Jesus — have relevance to present-day political, cultural, and social concerns. See also Willi Braun, *It's Just Another Story: The politics of remembering the earliest Christians* (London: Equinox, forthcoming).

the historical Jesus to “dislodge” the traditional imagination of Christian origins. Because this aspect of Mack’s work is so rarely understood, *A Myth of Innocence* is often cited as justification for grouping Mack within that group of scholars arguing that the historical Jesus was a Cynic-like sage. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is reported by Robert M. Price in his *Deconstructing Jesus*,⁴ where he claims the

power of Burton Mack’s case [for a Cynic-like Jesus] is such that he has managed to convince the great proponent of the Christ-Myth theory in our day, George A. Wells, to abandon the ground he defended for so long. Wells now significantly qualifies his own argument to the effect that, while there was a Cynic-style sage named Jesus underlying Q1, this shadowy figure did not give rise to the mythic Christ of the gospels, and that we must look elsewhere for the antecedents of the latter. And Mack would agree.⁵

Indeed, Mack might agree. However, even though Mack clearly argues for the identification of the “historical Jesus” as a Cynic-like sage in *A Myth of Innocence*, in light of his later work, such as his article “All the Extra Jesuses,”⁶ and especially his essay “The Historical Jesus Hoopla,”⁷ it seems to me that Mack’s case for a Cynic-like Jesus⁸ was a strategically rhetorical move, designed to discredit and disengage the regnant hypothesis that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet by demonstrating that the earliest textual evidence we have can (more?) plausibly be read as depicting Jesus as a Cynic-style sage. The strategic nature of

⁴ Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (New York: Prometheus, 2000).

⁵ Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*, 115. The reference Price makes is to George A. Wells, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 102-3.

⁶ Burton L. Mack, “All the Extra Jesuses: Christian Origins in Light of the Extra-Canonical Gospels,” *Semeia* 49 (1990), 169-76.

⁷ Burton L. Mack, “The Historical Jesus Hoopla,” in *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 25-40.

⁸ Burton L. Mack, “The Case for a Cynic-like Jesus,” in *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, Legacy*, 41-58.

this rhetorical move can be understood if one recalls that the dominant “Lukan-Eusebian” paradigm of Christian origins seems to assume, and perhaps even require, Jesus to be an apocalyptic prophet. Mack himself admirably summarizes this paradigm in his 1996 essay “On Redescribing Christian Origins”:

[In the dominant paradigm,] Christianity began when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified as the Christ and Son of God, appeared [or, in more “secularized” modern accounts, “seemed” to appear] after his resurrection, overwhelmed his disciples with his holy spirit, established the first church in Jerusalem, [etc.]...What it took to start the new religion was all there as a kind of divine implantation in the life of Jesus, needing only to germinate and develop as early Christians heard about it, believed it, and came to understand its import. We might call this scenario the big bang concept of Christian origins.⁹

This scenario, in the modern field of New Testament studies, relies heavily upon the assumption that Christianity began with a “Schweitzerian” Jesus, or with some variation thereof, such as the portrayal offered by recent defenders of apocalyptic Jesuses such as Dale C. Allison¹⁰ and Bart D. Ehrman.¹¹ One reason that this scenario remains attractive is that it seems more plausible, within the dominant paradigm of imagining Christian origins, to imagine that an apocalyptic prophet’s proclamation of the (eschatological) kingdom of God began the Christian religion than it does to imagine that a Cynic philosopher’s tongue-in-cheek observations about the kingdom of God could have started that same religion. Much could be

⁹ Burton L. Mack, “On Redescribing Christian Origins,” 247.

¹⁰ See especially Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

¹¹ See Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, apocalyptic prophet of the new millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

said in response to this, but I will merely turn to the writings of Mack himself, who has eloquently and succinctly responded to this very objection:

But what about the argument that a Cynic philosopher could not have started the Christian religion? This question assumes that the Christian religion started with the historical Jesus, and that the Cynic hypothesis must be the result of a quest for the historical Jesus who started the Christian religion. Neither of these assumptions is correct. The "Case for a Cynic-like Jesus" does not establish that a Cynic philosopher named Jesus must be thought of as the one who started the Christian religion. Its conclusions can be summarized otherwise by saying (1) that the earliest layers of the "teachings of Jesus" have close parallels to the sayings of Cynics which were popular at the time, (2) that the group responsible for these teachings imagined Jesus in ways similar to that of a Cynic teacher, (3) that the Jesus they remembered may be credited with starting a school tradition, but (4) this is the closest we will ever get to the historical Jesus, and (5) there is no indication of a grand design to start a new religion, either on the part of the teacher as remembered or on the part of the school that remembered him reflected in the earliest layers of his teachings.¹²

This lengthy quote demonstrates two things about Mack's attitude toward the Cynic-like Jesus. First, we should note that the Cynic parallels with the "teachings of Jesus" that scholars have identified do not point back to "the historical Jesus," but to the earliest layers of a particular Jesus movement's textual production, which portrays Jesus on the model of a Cynic philosopher. When Mack says "this is the closest we will ever get to the historical Jesus," he is highlighting the fact that we scholars do not "have" the historical Jesus; rather, we have what seem to be the earliest textual productions *about* Jesus. Mack credits Jesus with founding a school tradition that "remembered" him as a Cynic sage, but is quick to remind us that the earliest texts produced by that school are forever disconnected from the Jesus that existed in time and space. We have no historical Jesus here.

¹² Mack, "The Case for a Cynic-like Jesus," 56.

Second, it tells us that historians of Christian origins cannot continue to imagine Jesus as the *sine qua non* “originator” of early Christianities. We can no longer plausibly imagine that the earliest Christians were so overwhelmed by the uniqueness of Jesus, or by his miracles, or by some form of divine intervention, that they “responded” in the only way they knew how: by building a Church.¹³ This theological (or, better, mythical) scenario is implausible when submitted to rigorous historical scrutiny. Because historians of Christian origins operate under a social theory of religion that allows for a more robust view of human agency, they tend to be suspicious when they see a text claiming that a religion was founded through miracles and divine intervention. Rather, they view such a text as an instance of “social argumentation”¹⁴ in which social actors justify their investment in a given group through the invention of a prestigious myth of origin.

¹³ I do not intend this statement flippantly. Rather, it is a very pointed critique of the manner in which many historians of Christian beginnings continue to allow the Christian *myth* of Christian origins to stand as an *historical* datum, rather than a *mythical* one. The assertion that Christianity began in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, 33 CE, in response to a supernatural revelation that established the Church of the Post-Easter Faith, is an assertion of the Christian “belief-system,” surely not to be taken by the scholar as an accurate *historical* account of “how it all began.” Yet the scholarly literature is filled with discussions of the “Christ-event” or “Easter experience” that sparked the “post-Easter faith,” which must have generated such “charisma” that it “overwhelmed” those who would become the earliest Christians, and generated such “enthusiasm” among them that the movement spread like wildfire “to the very ends of the earth.” This is a (thinly-veiled) euphemistic way of historicizing this mythic scenario. Aside from the fact that this amounts to a very poor methodology, it is in any case implausible, given the incredible amount of early Christian data that simply cannot fit within this theological-ecclesiastical paradigm. The present state of research is such that the task before scholars is to account for the emergence of the (Christian) myth of Christian origins *itself*, rather than to force the data to fit within the framework of that myth.

¹⁴ See Russell T. McCutcheon, “Myth,” in W. Braun and R. T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), 190-208 for a demonstration of how to understand myths as instances of social argumentation.

Such a scenario fits perfectly in the case of the “Cynic-like Jesus.” As even the earliest textual evidence shows, the early Christians were not interested in portraying “the historical Jesus” in their writings, but rather were engaged in using the “Jesus” trope to imagine a founder-figure and construct a myth of origins for themselves. Mack emphasizes the shift in perspective that this entails for scholars as he concludes “The Historical Jesus Hoopla”:

[W]e need to start over with the quest for Christian origins. And the place to start is with the observation that the New Testament texts are not only inadequate for a Jesus quest, they are data for an entirely different phenomenon. They are not the mistaken and embellished memories of the historical person, but the myths of origin imagined by early Christians seriously engaged in their social experiments. They are data for early Christian mythmaking. The questions appropriate to these texts should be about the many Christian groups and movements in evidence, their particular social circumstances and histories, and the various social reasons they had for imagining a teacher in so many different ways.¹⁵

Mack's career has been devoted to asking these kinds of questions of the early Christian texts. And while it may not be entirely accurate to say that *A Myth of Innocence* is where it all started, surely it was with this text that it all “came together” in its most sustained, rigorous, and inspiring formulation. Taken together, all of Mack's work may be seen as an invitation; a call to consider questions not normally asked within the New Testament “paradigm” of imagining Christian beginnings, such as why early Christians had occasion to imagine Jesus in so many ways, thus creating a lot of “extra Jesuses” that do not—indeed, cannot—fit within the dominant paradigm. He makes clear the possible benefits of a methodological and conceptual paradigm shift for the study of Christian

¹⁵ Mack, “The Historical Jesus Hoopla,” 40.

origins, saying that by asking different questions, perhaps we can learn to focus not on the historical Jesus, but on the practices and persuasions that motivated the early Christians to justify their social experiments by referring them back to their mythical/rhetorical founder-figure. “Come to think of it,” he says, the answer to those questions “might make an even more interesting picture [of Christian beginnings] than the one we have had in mind.”¹⁶ If the vistas revealed to us in *A Myth of Innocence* are any indication, I am sure that it will.¹⁷

¹⁶ Burton L. Mack, “All the Extra Jesuses,” 175.

¹⁷ For an example of one of these “vistas” revealed to us by Mack’s work, and the significance thereof, consider a comment made by Roger Beck in his recent careful study of Mithraism. In a discussion on the comparison of early Christianities with Roman Mithraism, Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford, 2006), 12 n. 14, refers specifically to the work of Burton Mack, saying that “Mack’s Christian origins project aims at an explanation of Christian myth-making which disengages the extant texts and their predecessors (e.g. ‘Q’) from the ‘historical Jesus.’ As a result, his reconstructed early Christianities approximate more closely to the pagan mysteries than did previous paradigms of Christianity at its genesis. Welcome to our pagan field, where the historical Mithras never was a problem!” The significance of this shift in perspective requires a new look at old problems addressed by articles such as Gary Lease’s “Mithraism and Christianity: Borrowings and Transformations,” in H. Temporini and W. Hasse (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23.2 (Berlin, 1980): 1306-32, which, for all their sophistication, have been rendered somewhat obsolete by the results of later research on Christian origins. In light of Mack’s research, much of this work needs to be looked at again. As Beck’s comment illustrates, one of the great legacies of Mack’s work is that he has established parity between scholarly descriptions of Christian and non-Christian materials, thus allowing us to discuss the emergence of early Christianities without constantly referring back to the historical Jesus. This paves the way for responsible comparisons with other Hellenistic religious materials, in contradistinction to many earlier attempts at comparison which—intentionally or not—privileged Christianity in ways that Mack’s work has now revealed and rectified. For a thorough history of these comparative endeavors, as well as a brilliant proposal for the direction future comparisons should take, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990).

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