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Shaping Identity by Writing History: Earliest Christianity in its Making

Abstract

The gospel writings and Acts contribute actively to the shaping of a collective identity in earliest Christianity. The gospel writings have a *prospective* and a *synchronic* function when constructing a narrative of the past as history. Clearly, they also contribute to delivering and further defining a 'set of memories' and, to some extent, they already reflect earlier processes of identity formation (*retrospective* function). The gospel writings and Acts remain 'formative writings' in and beyond early Christianity. They widely depict the narrative of the past as a 'history' to come. Accordingly, they suggest the concept of an identity that is in the making. Since this concept is generally inclusive, it widely refuses to designate 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

Keywords: early Christian identity, gospel writing, historiography, missionary history, collective identity, literary memory, discipleship, moral constraints.

In earliest Christianity, thinking and writing about the past commences with the beginnings of literary activity. In his first letter, Paul already reflects upon and reminds his readers of the origins of missionary history (1 Thess 1–2).[1] This earliest 'Christian', i. e., ecclesial,[2] commitment to the past allowed Christ-believing assemblies to construct memorial culture, which, in turn, also served the needs of the present; for example, in Thessalonica (1:1),[3] Paul intended to build up shared remembrance with his community (ἐκκλησία). If we examine how the gospel writings came into being 20 to 40 years later, it appears that the narrative commitment to the past had shifted; it was now partly the result of *internal* factors in early Christian circles, such as the passing away of the first generation of Christ-believers, but also of *external* circumstances. The more Jesus-followers became involved in the

1 There is a current tendency in scholarship to avoid the term 'mission' in regard to early Christian gospel proclamation – a key term in Adolf von Harnack's history of early Christianity. On this problem see Becker 2015.

2 For the usage of the term 'ekklesia', cf. Trebilco 2011; Trebilco 2012.

3 Cf. Becker 2014a. On the social implications, Schreiber 2012.

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religious and social debates of their time (cf. e. g. Mk 12:13–17), the more there must have been a clear and increasing tendency to remember the gospel story properly from 'the very beginning' (ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς: Lk 1:2; cf. also Mk 1:1). Such a remembrance was always performed with specific regard to the interpretive, didactic and apologetic needs of the present (Lk 1:1–4). Therefore, we could argue that shaping a narrative account of past events is fundamentally rooted in how *individual* authors – like Paul, Mark and Luke – engage with the present in order to make sense of the past.[4]

Remembering the past and thinking about history consequently helped to develop an early 'Christian identity'.[5] This identity was shaped primarily in textual viz. literary terms[6] that could match Hellenistic-Roman culture and, as such, it finally proved successful in and beyond the social setting in the Hellenistic-Roman world. It is interesting to see that 'Christians conceptualized themselves in communitarian terms …'.[7] Ulrich Luz has suggested that the Matthean Gospel should be understood as a 'foundation narrative'.[8] Accordingly, the origins of narrativising the past are closely related to the origins of a specific religious group that defined itself by recollecting and interpreting a shared memory. As a distinct religious group that, as such, was soon perceived by outsiders (cf., e. g., Plin. *ep*. 10.96; Epict. *diss* 2.9.19.; 4.7.6), the *Christiani* needed to shape a 'communal history' which helped them to identify themselves in the socio-religious and political setting of the first century CE. The gospel writers chose the literary form of a εὐαγγέλιον – a prose narrative in the broader field of history-writing,[9] which soon reached a constitutive meaning for Christ-believing communities and was also more or less approachable for outsiders. However, from Paul to Mark and Luke-Acts, a shift in audience seems to take place; Paul primarily addresses local communities that circulated and published his letters in *recitatio*-style (cf. 1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16), whereas Mark begins to envision a reading audience (cf. Mk 13:14) and Luke subsequently directs his writings towards individual recipients, probably even readers ('Theophilus').

4 'Formed by tradition, by education, by the spirit of his time, by his own interests, and by the desire to equal or surpass his predecessors, the historian is seen by the ancients as fundamental to the entire historiographical enterprise … Any construction of the past in antiquity was, therefore, always mediated through the person of the historian', Marincola 2011, 6–7.

5 In respect to Israel, cf. Jonker 2011.

6 Cf. Lieu 2004; Lieu 2002, 171 and 211.

7 Eshleman 2012, 3.

8 Cf. Luz 2007, 15.

9 Cf. more comprehensively Becker (forthcoming).

During the second century and later, the gospel writings reached a (pre-) canonical (cf., e.g., Tatian, Irenaeus) status. It is precisely this development that mirrors how earliest Christian literature soon exceeded its communicative setting and gained a 'definatory power' regarding the expression of religious and communal identity. But how does the rise of *history-writing* impact the shaping of an 'early Christian *identity*'?

In terms of theory, 'identity' is a relatively complex and questionable phenomenon to examine. Is 'identity' something to be obtained or achieved? And does it act as a decisive criterion with an ultimately inclusive or exclusive function? Irrespective of these complexities, it is important to explore how 'identity formation' occurred in earliest / early Christianity. To some extent, this discourse continues the debate surrounding the so-called 'parting(s) of the ways'[10] and, accordingly, the concept of 'identity'[11] has become a prominent subject in studies of ancient religion(s) and cultural history.[12] However, current scholarship on 'identity formation' focuses primarily on ritual practices and cult,[13] social behaviour[14] and historical processes of constitution (including the shape of theological thinking, such as Christology)[15] in early Christianity and is only slowly beginning to consider the shape of 'identity' in *literary terms*.[16] As such, the question of how identity is shaped along a *narrative line*[17] has thus far been largely overlooked. It is precisely this desideratum I wish to address in this paper. I will argue that early Christian identity is in large part inspired and shaped by literary activity; it emerges as a *narrative* identity and appears as *literary memory*. I will also argue that early Christian concepts of history-writing play a significant and formative role in this process (which exceeds merely storing and collectivising 'memory').[18]

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10 Cf. most prominent in this debate, the contributions in Becker and Reed 2003, e.g. Goodman 2003.

11 Cf. in general Gephart 2001, 20.

12 Cf., e.g., in general Gephart and Waldenfels 1999; more specifically, various contributions in Schmitz and Wiater 2011; Öhler 2013; Liss and Oeming 2010; Wolter 2013.

13 Cf. e.g. Taussig 2009; Klinghardt and Taussig 2012.

14 Cf. e.g. various contributions in Holmberg and Winnige 2008; with a focus on archaeology Rutgers 2009.

15 Cf. e.g. various contributions in Rothschild and Schröter 2013; Gaventa and Hays 2008.

16 Cf. Eshleman 2012, 149 with reference to Lieu 2002; Lieu 2004.

17 Recently, Hübenthal 2014 points in that direction, however, by rather seeing Mark as the *result of* collective memorisation than an individual *impact on* early Christian identity formation.

18 Cf. general remarks in Rüpke 2012, 9; Kirk and Thatcher 2005.

1 'Identity' and 'history' – conceptual remarks

In order to investigate 'identity' and its implications in individual, anthropological and social terms, it is first necessary to distinguish between the 'subjective' and the 'collective' concept of identity. Since this article focuses on the question of how a group – such as the group of Christ-believers in ancient times – has shaped and defined *its* 'identity', the collective concept of identity seems most relevant for us. Recently, the French philosopher Vincent Descombes[19] has enriched the discourse about collective identities. Descombes distinguishes between various aspects with which we can envisage 'collective identity', such as juridical, historical and sociological aspects.[20] For our current purpose, let us concentrate on the *historical* aspect.[21] I wish to argue that identity is construed as well as approved or questioned *through* history; and history has to be construed by a narrative account. Consequently (or even more precisely), identity is closely affiliated to the narrative construction of the past *via* history-writing. The same is true with regard to issues of ritual, social, and moral debate; since law, custom and moral values themselves develop over time and history, the religious or cultural identity of a group will undoubtedly be reflected most comprehensibly in terms of its *history-writing*.[22]

Historiography is an essential part of a group's 'set of memories'.[23] The narrative shape of identity *via* history-writing occurs on a communicative as well as an ethical level. The *communicative level* results from how the relation between author, audience and text is inaugurated: Historiography 'establishes … an "imagined community" between author, reader, and the historical actors, a community, that is, which is not based on personal acquaintance of its members but on their shared emotional attitude towards a

19 Cf. Descombes 2013.

20 Cf. Descombes 2013, 182.

21 On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between the historical and the sociological aspects. As Descombes shows, since Aristotle's reflection on how a πόλις is defined, the sociological and the historical aspects behind identity formation are interwoven: 'If Aristotle transforms the identity of the *politeia* to the criterion of identity ("Identitätskriterium") of the *polis*, one must not understand this in the sense of political government, but in the broader sense of the entire law and customs, the basic order of a city, which expresses the common idea of the good' (cf. *Pol*. 1324a17), Descombes 2013, 192. Cf. also Flashar 2013, 129: '… das Glück eines jeden einzelnen Menschen muss mit dem der Polis als identisch angesehen werden (VII, 1324a5). Es gibt keine von der Polis getrennte Individualmoral'.

22 Cf. e. g. Mendels 1998.

23 Mendels 2013.

set of moral, cultural and political ideas and values'.[24] This applies to early Christian writings, such as Acts, where its author, Luke, selects certain paradigmatic narratives about Peter and Paul's interaction with their socio-religious environment in an attempt to 'convince the audience to accept an identity' that is, for instance, 'not based solely on ethnicity, but on a broader basis of shared beliefs and practices'.[25]

The *ethical level* of paradigmatic narratives implied here can be made more explicit: By constructing the past as 'history' and evaluating it from a moral perspective – as historians such as Sallust did in regard to Roman history –, various groups or peoples can define and reflect on their own moral values and thus their identity. It is possible that a tradition surrounding certain members of a group, such as the Athenians of the fifth century BCE, who are presented as 'supreme examples of moral and political behaviour to their fellow citizens' (cf. Isocrates), subsequently enters history-writing as an '"ideology" of classical Greek identity' (cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus).[26] However, it is also clear that historiographical accounts vary over time (cf. 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees), such as an 'indication of a reshaped identity of the Jews'.[27] It is therefore important to acknowledge that traditions change over time and that they can serve the continuation, the transformation or the re-shaping of 'identity'.

The close relation between the shaping of a collective identity and history-writing can be implemented in diverse temporal sequences; in other words, it can be perceived in a retrospective, a synchronic, or a prospective sense. Indeed, the relation between identity and historiography is relatively complex. Historiography itself is partly a *later product* or effect of how a grouping has generated its identity during a certain period of time – it thus has a *retrospective* and evaluative function (cf. e. g. Eusebius, Acta Apostolorum); however, history-writing in a broader sense contributes creatively to the *ongoing shape* of a religious and / or cultural identity – it is, so to speak, a continuous or *synchronic* companion to how a group defines its own identity (cf. Matthew, Luke, John, below). History-writing in this broader sense contributes actively to the *actual beginnings* of a narrative 'identity in the making' and therefore takes on a *prospective* function (cf. Mark, below).

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24 Wiater 2011, 61–62.

25 Baker 2013, 361.

26 Wiater 2011, 74. As such 'distinctive characteristics of Greek identity', we find ἐλευθερία, δικαιοσύνη, εὐσέβεια, ἀνδρεία, σωφροσύνη (ibid.).

27 Mendels 2013, 155: 'Whereas 1 Maccabees is a concoction of memories from Palestine, 2 Maccabees is an inscribed store of memories from the Egyptian Diaspora'. Cf. lately Eckhardt 2013.

Regardless of whether history-writing in its broader sense proceeds, accompanies or succeeds the shape of a collective identity, its role might still vary. Its authors viz. 'historians' might support, compete with or even counteract the formation of a religious or cultural identity of a certain grouping – a grouping to which they either belong themselves (cf. e. g. Josephus on Jews and Romans) or to which they attribute 'otherness' (cf. e. g. Tacitus on Jews, Polybius on the Romans) in a possible attempt to strengthen the moral values of their own group (cf. e. g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, above).

Historiography therefore represents a multidimensional entrance door to the investigation of how a religious / cultural identity came into being and developed over time. As such, it is already discerned in the field of Classics.[28] However, I would like to extend it to early Christianity. I argue that, when examining the shape of a 'Christian identity' in earliest times (first and second centuries CE) – indeed, some time before Christ-believers were involved in the τρίτον γένος discussions[29] and long before Christians became a 'sufficiently central and self-confident part of Roman society' around 350 CE[30] – we have to acknowledge that the shaping of identity and history-writing were already interwoven in retrospective, synchronic and prospective dimensions. We also have to presuppose various types of Hellenistic-Roman authors, who – in their perception of Christ-believing groupings – are either insiders (gospel writers) or outsiders (cf. e. g. Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Lucian)[31] and, as such, either act in a supportive, competitive or counteractive sense to how early Christian identity is established and defined.

Let us keep these elementary distinctions in mind and examine how the construction of the past as 'history' in earliest Christian times actually serves the initial shape of a Christian identity. By doing so, we will focus on the origins of 'history-writing'. I would like to address the following questions: When and how do Christ-believers start to construct the narrative about their past, in that they begin to think in terms of 'history'? And how do the earliest Christian literary documents that construct 'history' influence the shape of an early Christian 'identity'?

The *synchronic* and *prospective* dimensions in which the narrative construction of 'history' accompanies and proceeds the shaping of identity are

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28 Cf. e. g. Schmitz and Wiater 2011.

29 Cf. Wolter 2013, with references to e. g. Aristid. *Apol* 2.2; 15.1; Diogn. 1.1; Clem. *strom.* V.14.98.4; Tert. *nat* I.8.1; 8.11–12. Wolter points to the fact how a Jewish paradigm is transformed by the *interpretatio Graeca*, and how Paul himself refuses this paradigm (Gal 6:15; 5:6).

30 Cameron 2011, 20.

31 Cf. recently Ulrich 2013.

undoubtedly dominant factors in earliest Christian culture (even though the retrospective dimension is also apparent – see *Acta*, below). Interestingly enough, our observation regarding the *prospective function of history-writing* in earliest Christian times coincides precisely with Descombes' claim about the general value of future orientation when shaping a collective identity. Rather than memorising the past only *(lieu de mémoire)*, the aim of shaping identity focuses on *future times*; the shape of a collective identity indeed provides common places for the community to gather in the time to come ('Orte der Zukunft'; *lieu d'avenir*).[32] This is where the actual focus of identity formation lies: mastering the time to come, rather than coping with the past.

2 Memorising and communicating the past: The rise of the gospel narrative and its relatives

It is most likely with the third generation of Christ-believers (between 70 and 90 CE) that a preliminary type of 'history' about the Christ believers is shaped as prose in the gospel narrative. This shape develops along similar lines from Mark to Luke. However, while in the earliest gospel writing Mark conceptualises 'the beginnings of the gospel' proclamation (Mk 1:1) within a coherent narrative account, Luke enfolds his forerunner's literary concept in two dimensions: firstly, he enlarges the gospel account by including different and additional source materials (Q and L; cf. Lk 1–2 etc.) and by transforming the gospel story much more evidently towards the direction of 'historiography' (cf. e. g. synchronisms, *itinerarium*, dedication and methodological reflection); secondly, he composes two volumes in total (Luke and Acts), so that the gospel story is supplemented by another work that describes initial mission activities which ultimately succeed the Easter epiphanies.

As I have argued elsewhere, by writing this additional volume on the *Acta Apostolorum*, Luke might have developed the pattern of 'missionary history' he encountered in Pauline letter writing (1 Thess 1 etc.).[33] Indeed, Paul himself is committed to reflecting on the missionary history and the community's founding story. Thus, the idea of construing 'history' already begins with Paul (around 50 CE). While the apostle himself is interested in the construction of history in at least three ways – missionary history, autobiography and salvation history[34] – Mark and Luke tend to define a new literary

32 Descombes 2013, 212; the re-translation into French: E-MB.
33 Cf. Becker 2014a.
34 Cf. Becker 2014b.

type of history-writing by means of a gospel narrative. Here, the narrative is extended back to its original beginnings in Galilee and Judea and Jesus of Nazareth is the actual protagonist of the story. As such, we meet a narrator in Mark and Luke-Acts who – in contrast to Paul's narrator (differently: 2 Cor 12) – intentionally selects the third-person perspective for his story outline.

Against this background, Luke's idea to write a second volume in which the apostles once again become protagonists of the story (but this time from a third-person perspective) appears to be the literary attempt to apply the written gospel concept to the narrativisation of the apostolic ministry, and, thus, to *transform* Paul's letter writing two generations later so that it fits the literary conditions defined in large part by the gospel narrative. But how do we characterise the earliest Christian attempts to construct 'history', which reach from Paul to Mark and further to Luke and Acts? What do these writings have in common with Hellenistic historiography? And where do we find the literary and cultural specifics of the early Christian construction of the past that could shed light on the impacts of history-writing and reflect identity formation in earliest Christian times?

Some literary characteristics of the gospel accounts become evident when we consider their narrative outline and, more precisely, how the narratives end. This is because the end of a story is the key for its interpretation. In a recently re-published article entitled 'Kann Geschichte objektiv sein?' (1979), the German historian Thomas Nipperdey defines the focus on the *end of a story* as the actual perspective for constructing and displaying 'history':

> Die Struktur einer Geschichte, die handelnden Personen, das Wichtige und das Unwichtige, die Art der Aufeinanderfolge, die Interdependenz und die kausale Verkettung, das hängt alles vom Ende der Geschichte ab. Der Geschichtenerzähler wählt all das aus, was für das Ende relevant ist; er weiß immer schon, wie das Ende sein wird, und er organisiert das Material unter dieser Perspektive. Die Geschichte gibt nicht ein angebliches Ganzes, das ist eine Illusion, sondern sie erzählt einen Strang der Realität in einer Retrospektive … Die Tatsache, dass wir die Geschichte in diesem bestimmten Jahr erzählen, ist wesentlich; das eigentliche Ende der Geschichte, von dem her wir unsere Fragen stellen und die Perspektiven wählen, hängt an diesem Jahr.[35]

If we apply this insight to the narrative analysis of the gospel accounts, we can acquire a clearer picture of their literary characteristics. None of the gospel accounts give a clear indication as to their date of composition or the historical context of their authors. However, allusions to various events in the Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Mk 13 parr.) indicate that each of the four evangelists intentionally links Jesus' fortune to the catastrophe in 70 CE and thus writes from a *post* 70 CE per-

35 Cf. Nipperdey 2013, 66–67.

spective. In any case, in a compositional sense, it is clear from the outset of the gospel story that all evangelists consider Jesus' death as well as the Easter epiphanies as narrative presuppositions for their individual literary accounts (cf. Mk 3:6; 8:31 etc.).

However, since all gospel writings end with the topic of various Easter epiphanies, in different ways, they ultimately refuse to define a specific 'historical vanishing point'. Instead, in a mythical sense, they keep the narrative of the past open for their contemporary readers. Mk 16 can be seen as a conceptual point of departure for such a narrative strategy:

> 5. And they went into the tomb and saw a young man sitting on the right, wearing a white robe, and they were amazed. 6. He then said to them, 'Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who has been crucified. He is risen; he is not here. Look, the place where they put him. 7. So go and say to his disciples and to Peter, <He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he said to you>'. 8. And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone; for they were afraid.[36] (Mk 16:5–8)

What is pronounced to the women at the empty tomb here – or, according to the succeeding gospel narratives, to the Jesus-disciples in the frame of Easter Christophanies (cf. Lk 24:50–53; Mt 28:16–20; Joh 20:19–29; 21:1–23) – has not yet received the status of approval. They must await either Jesus' epiphany in Galilee itself (in Mk) or the narrative reaction to Jesus' commissioning after his epiphany among his disciples (in Mt and Lk). Thus, this narrative concept is *not yet* developed as historiographical in a strict sense. At the same time, we can observe a slight development from Mark to Matthew and Luke, which may already point to different stages of identity formation. According to Mark's literary construct, even the Easter epiphany remains *in statu expectandi*; in contrast, the other evangelists do provide epiphany stories; however, they still leave the disciples' reaction to Jesus' commissioning to be approved in future times. Consequently, the story's ending shapes a *prospect* (Mk) or a kind of fictitious *synchrony* (Mt, Lk, John) between author, reader and the protagonists of the story.

At the same time, the general difference between the gospel stories and Hellenistic-Roman historiographical accounts is already evident when we compare the gospel stories to Acts. Here, Luke puts Paul's arrival in Rome (Acts 28:16–31) into the literary focus and thus selects a 'historical event' as the actual narrative perspective. In Acts, the topic of a future Easter epiphany or a pending reaction to it, which is typical for the gospels' endings, has

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36 Translation: Yarbro Collins 2007, 779–780.

vanished for the sake of an *episodic narrative* about apostolic activity, which is framed by the idea of a continuing missionary history.

As a starting point, the narrative endings of the gospel narratives and Acts tell us something important about how the construction of history *de facto* works. From this, we can also gain insights into how the construction of history and identity interact. So, not accidentally, the psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen has suggested that a narrative designed to shape collective identity should contain a 'valuable endpoint'[37] as well as various other literary characteristics that define a cohesive narrative account, such as causalities and the stability of literary figures. It is therefore important to ask what the gospel narrative endings can tell us about the interrelation of history and identity in the last third of the first century CE.

The story about the beginnings of the gospel proclamation, i. e., Jesus' ministry and death, is communicated as a collective 'set of memory' (cf. Mendels 1998/2013). This does not simply serve the preservation of memories, but neither can it ultimately be resumed from a historian's point of view. On the contrary, according to their narrative endings, the gospel stories are not yet history; instead, they await their approval in the author's present time and future. Thus, the gospel stories generally *accompany* the shaping of a Christ-believing identity; the collective identity remains in the making. Acts, however, appears as a result of the earliest stages in developing a 'Christian' identity (cf. Acts 11:26; 26:28: Χριστιανός) – it selects a retrospective view of the narrative. Here, the story *succeeds* the beginnings and development of the formation of Christ-believing groupings and communities – from Jerusalem to Antioch, Philippi, Corinth and Rome – and the identification of real discipleship and witnessing (Acts 1:8: μάρτυρες).

3 Moral constraints: Protagonists and characters

As we discussed above, the shaping of identity *via* history-writing occurs on a communicative and an ethical level. In the previous section, we focused on the *communicative* level, since we examined how the gospel writings in general provide a narrative prospect or synchrony between author, audience and text; the story that has been told, to some extent, still needs to be approved for the sake of the protagonists as well as the author and his audience. To some degree, thus, protagonists, author and audience are contemporar-

37 Gergen 1998, 172: 'Einführung eines werthaltigen, valorativen Endpunktes' (orig.: in italics).

ies. This also means that the story outline functions *inclusively*: It does make sense for both author and audience to identify with the story and its protagonists, since they all share the enduring perspective of future orientation.

I would now like to concentrate on the *ethical* level of the narrative. What kinds of 'superior qualities of characters' are defined within the gospel stories and Acts? In which way do they stimulate or support the process of identity formation? Let us take Jesus and Paul as examples here. Both figures explicitly call on their 'disciples' to follow (ἀκολουθέω: e. g. Mk 8:34) or to imitate (μιμητής: e. g. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; cf. Acts 26:29) them. They thus represent in an explicit sense values and virtues which may define how the collective identity of Jesus followers and Christ believers should develop. This is oriented towards imitating the paradigm of the *individual*.

The narrative characteristic of the *Jesus* figure within the gospel narratives should be viewed in relation to his disciples. Jesus himself is characterised by his ἐξουσία as a teacher and a miracle worker as well as by his willingness to suffer and to accept the violent and unjust death in Jerusalem. The prediction of his resurrection (Mk 8:31 etc.) finally acts as a vision of compensation as well as an ultimate divine approval of his mission and his continuous status as God's son (Mk 1:11; 9:7; 15:39). Accordingly, discipleship would mean participation in Jesus' eschatological fortune (Mk 8:35). In parts, Mark promotes this concept of discipleship beyond the actual narrative frame – he extends it to the events of the Last Days (apocalyptic speech: Mk 13:9–13). The concept of discipleship is a central element of Mark's community building strategy[38] and thus serves the identity formation of his readers; the idea of an unlimited discipleship that can even become a 'way of the cross' implies a community that consists of Jesus-followers rather than pure sympathisers with the group of Christ-believers (see Acts and its idea about the φοβούμενοι).[39] Even though following Jesus also entails participation in his eschatological fortune, such a discipleship would still be different to the philosophical idea of an ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν:[40] The semantics of personal transformation or assimilation is restricted to Jesus only (transfiguration scene: Mk 9:2–10; the reverse is also said about Jesus as 'human' in a Christological context: Phil 2:7).[41]

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38 Cf. also Wischmeyer 2011.

39 For a discussion of this, see Barnett 1999, 270; Koch 2013, 131.

40 Cf. Baltes 2003. There are, however, also instances in New Testament epistolography where ideas about the *homoiosis* of disciples are expressed in ethical and eschatological terms, e. g. 1 John 3:2; James 3:9 refers back to the *imago Dei* motif.

41 The Pauline semantics of assimilation to Jesus either relate to the apostle's fortune (Phil 3:10–11: συμμορφιζόμενος) or refer to the object of the community's hope (2 Cor

However, even the concept of discipleship remains in the making, since Mark can only propagate and not evaluate what discipleship is. As such, he promotes it to his readers as a *future value*. Indeed, the gospel story itself provides only few, casual and limited examples for reasonable discipleship (e. g. the woman in Bethany; Josef of Arimathea), while the vast majority of 'disciples' *de facto* counteract the concept (e. g. Peter's denial; the women's fright and silence in Mk 16). In this respect, Peter is a particularly interesting figure, since he is painted in rather ambiguous colours. Peter is among the first to be called as a disciple (Mk 1:16) and – shortly after his confession in Mk 8:29 – he belongs to the inner circle of Jesus followers (Mk 9:2; 13:3); and, even though he does not keep his own promises (Mk 14:29) but rather denies Jesus (Mk 14:66), he is ultimately pronounced blameless and, as *the* leading disciple, thought to await Jesus' epiphany in Galilee (Mk 16:7, above). The lack of coherence regarding Peter's narrative identity is problematic for literary accounts designed to shape identity;[42] however, in Mark, the incoherence seems to function as a literary strategy. Here, the lack of coherence obviously relates to the story's outline and plot.[43] Interestingly enough, there are few 'external causalities' that could explain Peter's change of attitude.[44] In other words, the reasons for coherence or incoherence must, in general,[45] lie in the figure itself. Accordingly, Mark's gospel writing presents a concept of discipleship that again presents an *inclusive function* when it comes to discipleship. Changes of personal attitude appear as values which invite readers to participate in the story.

We can apply this to the way in which *Paul* is constructed in Acts. Having witnessed Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 8:1), Paul's calling in Acts 9 (1–31) transforms him (from ch. 13 onwards) into the central character of Luke's narrative. What qualities lie in his narrative character? By finally reaching Rome – a long-term ambition (Rom 15:23) – Paul reveals himself as the paradigmatic 'martyr' who fulfils Jesus' initial commissioning to global mis-

3:18) – in both cases, it correlates to Jesus' (paradigmatic) fortune rather than to his status.

42 Cf. Gergen 1998, 175: 'Die wohlgeformte Erzählung ist typischerweise eine, in der die Charaktere … der Geschichte eine dauerhafte oder kohärente Identität über die Zeit hinweg besitzen. Ein bestimmter Protagonist kann nicht stimmig in einem Moment ein Schurke und im nächsten ein Held sein.'

43 Gergen 1998, 175: 'Natürlich gibt es offenkundige Ausnahmen von dieser generellen Tendenz. Dabei handelt es sich … meist um Fälle, in denen die Geschichte gerade diese Veränderung selbst zu erklären versucht.'

44 Gergen 1998, 175: Es 'können kausale Kräfte eingeführt werden, die eine Änderung in einem Individuum … herbeiführen.'

45 With the exception of the visionary permission of participating in the Easter epiphanies to come (Mk 16:7).

sionary activity (Acts 1:8). However, in contrast to Mark's account of Peter, Luke is much more interested in presenting a 'narrative coherence' in his portrayal of Paul. In general, Paul complies with his calling (Acts 9:6) while other minor characters of Luke's account in Acts frequently fail in their discipleship (Hananias and Saphira: Acts 5:1–11). The picture of Paul in Acts reveals itself as *retrospective*.

4 Constructing history and shaping identity: Some concluding remarks

The gospel writings and Acts contribute actively to the shaping of a collective identity. The gospel writings have a prospective and a synchronic function when constructing a narrative of the past as history. Clearly, they also contribute to delivering and further defining a 'set of memories' and, to some extent, they already reflect earlier processes of identity formation. However, at this point, we have to examine the nuances in order to be more precise about the various literary stages in which the formation of history and identity develops.

As a final example, let us appeal to the staging of the literary motif of a violent death / martyrdom. The prediction of the violent death of the sons of Zebedee in Mark (10:35–40) signals experiences of persecution and martyrdom among the early circle of Jesus followers in the same way that the note on James' violent death does in Acts (12:1–2). However, while Luke in general adopts a *retrospective* view on martyrdoms in Acts – as we see already in the story about Stephen (Acts 6:8–7:60) – Mark leaves the prediction about future martyrdoms in the status of prophecy *(vaticinium ex eventu)*.[46] He, once again, suggests a *prospective* view. In other words, in Mark, missionary history should be expected in the future. The author alludes to his historical knowledge but does not explicate it and, thus, he reveals himself in synchrony with his readers and his literary protagonists. Consequently, the collective identity of Christ-believers remains in the making and is oriented more towards collective future expectations than defined by common events experienced in the past.

The shared tradition of Jesus' crucifixion and death acts as a basic 'set of memories' and, as such, delivers as well as re-shapes[47] central aspects of

46 For the rhetorical function of prophecy and its impact on the shape of an early Christian identity, cf. Penner and Vander Stichele 2009, 251.

47 We should take into account how the passion narrative as a story is already re-shaped in that it is no longer delivered separately but included in the Markan gospel narrative.

identity making. However, since the Markan gospel story does not finish along the core lines of the passion narrative but moves beyond to an 'open end', the literary memorisation of the past reveals itself as no longer sufficient. Mark ends his gospel narrative – just like his successors (in different ways) – by indicating programmatically that history has to be awaited and to be approved in the future; consequently, the identity of Jesus followers appears to be in the making.

But how can we envisage the further process of identity formation after the gospel writings and Acts came into being? How do the gospel writings as such finally affect the process of identity formation in early Christianity? Which role do they play in the longer run? By summarising and further developing some previous observations, I will now identify four aspects which seem to be most important here.

Firstly, the gospel writings serve the *literary memory* of the past in that they commemorate Jesus' mission and death. And they continue to do this throughout the course of cultural history (as Bach's passion music, for instance, indicates). However, the gospel writings do not only provide a 'set of memories' of the past; since they conceptualise the story about the past in a prospective and a synchronic mode and propagate an inclusive concept of discipleship, they are most evidently oriented to a history yet to come. Accordingly, they approach identity formation as the task of an identity that is in the making (propagandist literature). Such a view calls for promoting discipleship.

Secondly, as Simone Winko identifies, canonisation has to be understood as an elementary aspect of identity formation.[48] Accordingly, we should not view the formal process of canonisation up to the fourth century CE as a continuous evaluation of the gospel writings as fundamental Christian texts. Instead, we should understand that, from Mark to Matthew, Luke and John, a complementary set of gospel narratives was produced within an approximate twenty-year period that already appeared as a phenomenon of 'proto-canonisation'. Since Matthew and Luke succeed Mark with a surprisingly high amount of literary conformity, they *de facto* agree with the Mar-

48 Canons are ascribed 'vier Funktionen […], die sie für ihre Trägergruppe erfüllen: (1) Identitätsstiftung: K[anon]es repräsentieren konstitutive Normen und Werte für ihre Bezugsgruppe; (2) Legitimationsfunktion: Sie geben der Gruppe eine legitime Basis und grenzen sie gegen andere ab; (3) Handlungsorientierung: Sie koordinieren ästhetische und moralische Normen sowie Verhaltensregeln; (4) Kommunikative Funktion: Sie sichern Kommunikation über gemeinsame, allen bekannte Gegenstände. Je homogener eine Gesellschaft, desto wahrscheinlicher ist es, dass es nur wenige K.es gibt …', Winko 2009, 317.

kan concept of narrativising the past. They approve the idea that the gospel concept prepares for identity formation.

Thirdly, we must acknowledge that the phenomenon of the 'four gospel canon' also highlights a certain *struggle for identity*. As much as Mark is supplemented, revised (Mt and Lk) and re-shaped (John) early on, the diversity of gospel concepts refers to a divergent interpretation of, for instance, ethics, eschatology or concepts of discipleship.[49] Interestingly, from the second and third centuries onwards, literary diversification is soon complemented by proposals of *harmonisation*. Tatian's 'Diatessaron', as much as the fourth century discourse on the material canon[50] and Augustine's ideas about a 'gospel harmony' might best be seen in this light. Of course, they have functioned as attempts to define a Christian 'macro identity' that transcends local settings and literary needs. However, at the same time, the production and promotion of individual, partly competing, gospel narratives during the first and second centuries implies that identity formation develops in literary continuity as well as discontinuity: indeed, in a continuous tension or struggle between literary repetition and creation or re-shaping. The basic definition and approval of a 'material canon' – including the four gospel narratives – in and beyond the fourth century indicate that the conformity as well as plurality of the synoptic gospels and John are finally approved as crucial elements of such a Christian 'macro-identity'.

Finally, I would like to argue that the gospel writings and Acts remain 'formative writings' in and beyond early Christianity. They widely depict the narrative of the past as a 'history' to come. Accordingly, they suggest the concept of an identity that is in the making. Since this concept is generally inclusive, it widely refuses to designate 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in distinct terms (but cf. already 1 Thess 4:12).[51] To distinguish between 'us' and 'others' might only relate to a later time; at this point, we might like to appeal to the third and fourth century CE, at which time a Christian macro identity appeared on the scene. It was only then that 'Christian identity' distanced itself from the outside world by distinctive terms:

> At some time, around the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, Christians began referring to those 'outside' their community as *pagani*. It is unlikely that there was ever a conscious search for a new term. *Paganus* was simply the most natural term for any Latin-speaking community to apply to outsiders. To use a contemporary idiom,

49 Cf. e. g. Runesson 2011.

50 Cf. lately Heil 2014.

51 To some extent, however, John is a conceptual exception here, regarding both his dualistic thinking and his concept of a revelatory Christology.

paganus represented 'the other' in any group or community, in this case (of course) the other in a now Christian world.[52]

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52 Cameron 2011, 24. *Paganus* = non-Christian is not used in a pejorative sense (19). – I would like to thank Sarah Jennings (Aarhus) for copyediting the English text.

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