

# Crisis as a Catalyst: Early Christian Texts and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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While scholars of early Christianity generally know how to approach *κρίσις* in the ancient sense of the word, ‘crisis’ in the modern sense of the word, at least as it has become part of the lived realities of many in the COVID-19 pandemic, is another story. In this special issue of *JSNT* ‘crisis’ is taken as a vantage point for researching early Christian sources and their reception(s). In so doing, both an exploration of ‘crisis’ (a seldom-used vantage point) is offered and, at the same time, insight is given into a variety of ways in which biblical texts are reflective of negotiating crises, or have been received in contexts of crisis as resources for dealing with the same, often through forms of ‘meaning-making’. This often constitutes ‘attempt[s] to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence ... by formulating and imposing a convincing message’ (Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern and Sundelius 2016: 79). Taking seriously strategic ‘meaning-making’ frequently associated with crisis situations, the current pandemic moment here serves as a catalyst to generate new insights within the discipline.

This volume emerged out of the Amsterdam New Testament Colloquium and the Centre for Contextual Biblical Interpretation and their associated networks in different parts of the world. Looking back at how this cooperation originated, it can itself be seen as a response to the pandemic and as a means of making sense of it, and one’s role within it, through committing scholarly resources to the reflection of the topic of crisis. Such reflections often help in negotiating the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability that characterize such moments. How this plays out can be illustrated by what, in retrospect, is a slightly embarrassing anecdote: as editor and contributors, we were worried that this issue might appear

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only when COVID-19 would effectively be ‘over’. This inability to make sound estimations of the situation, in combination with a strong desire to gain a foothold and be able to plan, was also exemplified by the president of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (Netherlands), Ineke Sluiter, when asked in an interview what she thought of a statement by the prime minister, Mark Rutte, that in a crisis one needed to take 100% of the decisions on the basis of only 50% of the necessary information. She responded that Rutte was overly optimistic regarding the amount of available information. Yet, as this issue hopes to show, it is precisely in seeking to deal with such uncertainty through revisiting (historical, cultural, and religious) assemblages that new insights emerge, both into the role of such traditions in the context of crisis and into the role of crisis in the historical context of these traditions.

### **Crisis and the Origins of Early Christian Texts**

Beyond the topic of an impending *κρίσις* in the sense of eschatological judgment, many situations in which early Christian texts have been written can well be characterized as marked by crisis in some form, at least when this is understood as a ‘serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions’ (Rosenthal, Charles, and ‘t Hart 1989: 10). Both at a personal level, when thinking of ego-documents such as the Pauline correspondence (and, at least on a certain level of the traditions incorporated into it, the Revelation of John), and at the level of a community, such as those addressed by the Johannine literature, crisis is an important dimension of the historical contexts out of which these texts emerged. The technique of negotiating (through processes of meaning-making) a crisis experienced by a post-Easter community by means of writing its story into the story of the individual Jesus of Nazareth (and his followers) is a well-known aspect of the New Testament (and other) gospels – the personal and the communal are, thus, interwoven.<sup>1</sup> Similarly a yearning for a cosmic *κρίσις* is, in many ways, related to situations of crises at much more modest levels, such as forms of political, economic, cultural and cultic injustice and violence. From some of the earliest layers within early Christian texts, such as John the Baptist’s call to repentance in light of the coming of an eschatological figure, to a late text, such as 2 Pet. 2.4, the tendency to regard the world from the perspective of an upcoming *κρίσις* is prevalent and frequently functions to deal variously with problematic ethical behavior (a first form of paraenesis based on *κρίσις*), provide exhortation to endure as troubles are merely a sign of the upcoming end (a second form of paraenesis), or, closely related to

1. It is possible to observe similar dynamics elsewhere, for instance when Paul tells his Philippians that they can see their struggle in his own (Phil. 1.30).

the latter, as a means of explaining dire straits or threatening developments, for instance as harbingers of the *κρίσις*. Forms of crisis within a community, critical situations experienced by a church or crises at a more encompassing level (e.g., war) are therefore often, and unsurprisingly, filtered with and/or interpreted in the light of *κρίσις*.

In this issue accordingly, Joan Taylor's article addresses the health and overpopulation crises experienced in first-century Galilee, and the Jesus movement's response to these. Karin B. Neutel and Peter-Ben Smit figure Paul's imprisonment as a crisis experience and lens for reading Philippians. Alexander Stewart probes fear appeals in the Apocalypse of John as a coping strategy, and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte investigates plagues as part of the eschatological human condition in the context of the book of Revelation. All underscore the point that both *κρίσις* and crisis are of importance for research into early Christian texts, yet, much more attention has been given to the former than to the latter. The contributions here can, therefore, be understood as an invitation to engage more thoroughly with theorizations of crisis as a heuristic lens for approaching early Christian texts, a venture that would be encouraged by developments in crisis theory that underline the importance of meaning-making, including the development of narratives and the employment of symbolism and ritual (Boin, 't Hart, Stern and Sundelius 2016),<sup>2</sup> which are, of course, key ingredients of early Christian traditions.

### **Context as Catalyst: Reception of Early Christian Texts**

The articles in this issue that focus on the reception of New Testament texts in the context of COVID-19 – James Crossley's article on contemporary politics and Helen John's study of the experiences of Christianization and the pandemic among 'ordinary' readers in rural Namibia – evidence of an intensification of the reception of canonical traditions in light of the pandemic, not infrequently with an innovative twist. In fact, situations of crisis can well be regarded as catalysts for the reception of canonical texts and traditions because crises are characterized by pressure caused by the combination of duress, uncertainty and the urgency to resolve the situation. While examples of this abound throughout history, only a brief look at the literary output caused by the COVID-19 pandemic already in the biblical studies discipline serves to illustrate the point, with authors such as Tom Wright (2020), Rowan Williams (2020), Walter Brueggemann (2020) and John Piper (2020) publishing books (in English) on the topic at high speed (and yes, it seems to be a male thing to do!). Revisiting these traditions in contexts of crisis, as is done by the authors in this issue, sheds light on the role of canonical

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2. Paul 't Hart, Professor of Public Administration at the Utrecht University School of Governance, was kind enough to supply the reference.

traditions at diverse levels in diverse societies, thereby both witnessing to the ongoing significance of such forms of meaning-making within and beyond the boundaries of institutionalized Christianity. The latter, in fact, mirrors what could be observed regarding early Christian texts: interpretation, consolation and exhortation are all substantiated based on these texts and are amplified by the sacred character of their foundation. Simultaneously, the use of these texts also connects these interpretations with important dimensions of the contexts out of which they emerged historically.

### **Crisis and the Calling of New Testament Studies**

The contributions collected here illustrate some of the rich repertoires of resources available in the history of humankind by showcasing a (very) small part of one tradition in this history, i.e., the broad historical trajectory of emergence and transformation of the Christian tradition as a Jewish sect turned world religion, in order to make sense of situations of crisis and to cope with them accordingly. This certainly does not reduce this religious tradition or other religious traditions to mere coping mechanisms, but it does shed light on an important role they can play, have played and continue to play in a variety of settings and for a variety of people, especially in the context of crisis. When departments of theology, religious studies or the humanities at large are wondering what their contribution to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic might be, or when individual scholars, whether junior or senior, do so, recalling earlier crises and unearthing such archives might well present itself as one of the most authentic and meaningful ways to respond. Highlighting such repertoires, with their creative and strategic dimensions of meaning-making, consolation and exhortation, disrupts those easy platitudes to which religious traditions can too frequently be reduced. No, calls to act responsibly, to have a high regard for those who are weak and vulnerable and to look after the well-being of society at large are by no means ‘natural’, they are (precarious) products of a long cultural tradition, which, in situations of crisis, are both direly needed and under pressure. Recalling and fostering such cultural traditions and their sources, in particular the Christian tradition in all its variety (without denying ethically deeply problematic stances that have also been and continue to be advocated on the basis of Christian sources – a fact that only speaks to their enduring cultural significance and power), can well be part of the role of New Testament Studies in this context. It may even provide the basis for the development of a public voice, indicating how what can be found in New Testament texts could potentially be a resource for the common good, beyond the circles of those who are professionally or institutionally committed to studying and receiving them.

## Outlook

The work collected in this issue can be read both as a source of information regarding early Christian texts and crises, past and present, and as an invitation. This invitation is a triple one. First, as the contributions on early Christian origins show, the focus on ‘crisis’ is a very fruitful lens for researching the literary remnants of these first communities of Christ devotees. It is currently, however, both underused and undertheorized – here lies a promising future field of research, in which interdisciplinary cooperation with both classical studies and contemporary political science might well be the way forward. Second, the contributions on receptions of New Testament texts in the context of crisis show that such situations are particularly powerful catalysts for creative interpretations. Beyond creativity as such, analyzing the reception of New Testament texts in crisis situations is also a good approach to probing the role and dynamics of meaning-making in such contexts; knowledge of this is important to gauge the role of (both religious and non-religious) forms of meaning-making during crises and also invites further research at the intersection of diverse forms of history (social, political, cultural), theology and religious studies, and sociology and politicology. Finally, highlighting the close relationship between early Christian and, in canonical form, New Testament texts and situations of crisis, especially when it comes to their role in negotiating such situations, research into them may well provide New Testament scholarship with a platform for presenting its knowledge and findings in such a way that it can fruitfully be received in broader public discourse.

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