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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rethinking adoptionism: An argument for dismantling a dubious category

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## Abstract

This article argues that adoptionism is an anachronistic category when used to describe texts from the first three Christian centuries, a mirage created by later theological controversies about the relationship between the Father and the Son. I survey the evidence for second- and third-century figures and texts generally identified ‘adoptionist’ in order to show that these figures do not advocate a shared christological stance. Instead, we find a variety of distinct postures that disagree with both each other and with common scholarly definitions of adoptionism. Although metaphors of adoption were theologically productive in early Christianity, to identify early Christian figures, texts and movements as adoptionist implies a theological unity that does not exist. The category itself is a problem. Not only are historical adoptionists absent, but early Christian metaphors of adoption and divine sonship functioned within diverse articulations of Jesus’ identity which do not map onto modern definitions.

**Keywords:** adoptionism; christology; heresiology; historiography; pre-existence

The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.

Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and his Precursors’<sup>1</sup>

In a brief essay first published in 1951, the Argentinian short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) suggests that a handful of literary works – from an entirely imagined ninth-century Chinese disquisition on the nature of the unicorn to Søren Kierkegaard’s parable about the North Pole – can each be regarded as Franz Kafka’s ‘precursors’. For Borges, this quality does not lie in their similarity to one another (‘Not all of them resemble each other’, he notes). They become Kafka-esque only in light of subsequent acts of reading and writing: ‘if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist’. In this sense,

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<sup>1</sup>Borges’ essay, originally published in 1951, is translated by Ruth Simms in Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Kafka and his Precursors’, in *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 106–8. All translations of ancient texts are my own.

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Borges writes, Kafka ‘creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.’<sup>2</sup>

In this brief ‘fiction’, Borges explores fundamental epistemic and historiographic questions: *how* to categorise past texts and intellectual projects and *what* these projects of categorisation enable one to know and do. Borges’ language of ‘precursors’ offers a way to conceptualise the act of heresiological invention which creates early Christian ‘adoptionism’. As I argue, adoptionism in Christian texts from the first three centuries CE is an anachronism, created as modern scholars retroject fourth-century controversies about the relationship of Father and Son into earliest Christianity. Without later christological debates and polemics – and without the categorising work of modern scholars – we would not perceive adoptionism in early Christian texts at all. For this reason, the category of adoptionism is problematic. While it creates the illusion of a solid entity, adoptionism conflates and distorts disparate phenomena. To paraphrase Borges, adoptionism appears ‘in texts from diverse literatures and periods’ only because later christological controversies and modern scholarly discourses ‘modif[y] our conception of the past’.<sup>3</sup>

In rethinking adoptionism as an analytical category, this article takes its impetus from the re-evaluation of another purported second-century heresy: gnosticism. Twenty-five years ago, Michael Williams drew attention to the problem of imposing theological categories on disparate early Christian groups with his monograph *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Alain Le Boulluec’s work on the discursive origins of heresy, Williams argued that ‘gnosticism’ is a problematic category, a phantasm created by the act of naming.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that a similar phantasmic act of creation constitutes adoptionism. Modern scholars project Nicene orthodoxy, with its polemic against Arianism and its anxieties about the relationship between Jesus’ humanity and his divine pre-existence, into the discursive space of earlier adoption metaphors.<sup>6</sup> Only in light of fourth-century debates do proposed examples of ‘adoptionism’ coalesce into a theology, defined primarily by a

<sup>2</sup>Borges, ‘Kafka and his Precursors’, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d’hérésie dans la littérature grecque II<sup>e</sup>–III<sup>e</sup> siècles*, 2 vols (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985); ET (with a new introduction from Le Boulluec): *The Notion of Heresy in Greek Literature in the Second and Third Centuries*, trans. David Lincicum and Nicholas Moore (Oxford: OUP, 2022). Robust debate continues about what might properly be called ‘gnosticism’ and the extent to which heresiological accounts or Nag Hammadi documents reflect a unity. In particular, Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003) and David Brakke *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) engage Williams’ arguments at length. For the current state of the question, see Einar Thomassen, *The Coherence of ‘Gnosticism?’* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021). For recent discussion of the reconstruction of theological movements and social groups out of textual clusters, see David Brakke, ‘The Gospel of Judas and the End of Sethian Gnosticism’, in Courtney J. Friesen (ed.), *Envisioning God in the Humanities: Essays on Christianity, Judaism, and Religion in Honor of Melissa Harl Sellev* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), pp. 133–52.

<sup>6</sup>On divine sonship and adoption in Arian christology, see D. E. Groh and R. C. Gregg, ‘The Centrality of Soteriology in Early Arianism’, *Anglican Theological Review* 59 (1977), pp. 260–78. Showing how fourth-century debates shape later accounts of Paul of Samosata’s theology, see Robert L. Sample, ‘The Christology of the Council of Antioch (268 C.E.) Reconsidered’, *Church History* 48 (1979), pp. 18–26.

rejection of Jesus' pre-existence rather than by any internal coherence.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the modern terminology of adoptionism encourages anachronistically reading Nicene categories into early Christian christological metaphors.<sup>8</sup>

### Defining the category

In the case of adoptionism, the problem of grouping disparate figures or texts into fictive unities is acute. Historical investigation is hampered by imprecise scholarly categories. We do not know of any figures who identified themselves as adoptionist nor, indeed, do we have any reason to think that adoptionists formed a coherent group. As I argue below, it is difficult to identify any adoptionist figures at all. Yet, if clear examples are hard to find, scholars have no difficulty in defining adoptionism. To take an influential recent example, Bart Ehrman asserts that

adoptionists believed that Christ was a full flesh and blood human being, who was neither pre-existent nor (for most adoptionists) born of a virgin. He was born and he lived as all other humans. But at some point of his existence, usually his baptism, Christ was adopted by God to stand in a special relationship with himself and to mediate his will upon the earth.<sup>9</sup>

In the standard reference work *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Winrich Löhr defines adoptionism as 'eine christologische Konzeption, welche die vorzeitige Zeugung und die Präexistenz Christi leugnet und annimmt, daß der Mensch Jesus von Gott zum Sohn adoptiert wurde'.<sup>10</sup> James Dunn defines adoptionism as a position that 'denied Christ's pre-existent deity' and posited instead that 'he was *only* a man adopted by God as Son at his Jordan baptism'.<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Michael Bird glosses adoptionism as the assertion that 'Jesus is a human who *becomes*

<sup>7</sup>There are inescapable problems with describing christology as 'high' or 'low'; see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), pp. 4–5. For this article, I use the language of 'divine identity', while recognising that this term poses its own challenges.

<sup>8</sup>The history of identifying an early Christian movement as adoptionist goes back to Adolf von Harnack's *History of Dogma*, 7 vols (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976 [1888]): on the earliest christology, see vol. 1, pp. 183–204; on second-century Roman 'adoptionism', see vol. 3, pp. 14–51; on eighth-century Spanish adoptionism, see vol. 5, pp. 278–92. The category of adoptionism was developed by Johannes Weiss, *Das Urchristentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1917), esp. pp. 85–6; and Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921). While Nicene thought shapes the sources through which we have access to earlier phenomena, it is not fourth-century figures who invent this category of adoptionism or who group the varied figures and texts together. Nor does the quite distinct phenomenon of eighth-century Western adoptionism – on which see John C. Cavadini, *The Last Christology of the West: Adoptionism in Spain and Gaul, 785–820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) – lead to the construction of early Christian adoptionism as a category. For this, rather, one must wait until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>9</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: OUP, 2011 [1993]), p. 15; cf. the similar definition on p. 47.

<sup>10</sup>Winrich A. Löhr, 'Adoptionismus', *Religion in Gegenwart und Geschichte*, 4th edn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), vol. 1, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996 [1980]), p. 62.

divine'.<sup>12</sup> Such definitions of adoptionism offer a clear theological profile: Jesus was born a human (without divine pre-existence), was adopted by God at some point in his biography (typically his baptism) and – by that act of adoption – became the divine Son.

Despite this consensus of definition, robust debate rages about whether the earliest Christian understandings of Jesus were adoptionist or not. Bird argues that the earliest christology was 'incarnational, not adoptionist' and that a 'full-fledged adoptionist christology did not emerge until the late second century'.<sup>13</sup> For Bird, this second-century (and later) adoptionism implies a relatively durable set of theological claims, incompatible with Nicene orthodoxy and likewise foreign to earliest Christianity. Ehrman, advocating an 'early adoptionist christology', also identifies early adoption metaphors with a more-or-less stable adoptionism that can be set against later christologies.<sup>14</sup> Ehrman and Bird represent the opposing positions in recent scholarship.<sup>15</sup> For all parties, early Christian adoption metaphors are defined in relation to fourth-century christological controversies: was Jesus a mere human adopted by God or is he, in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, 'begotten from the father before all ages' (τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων)?

In this article, I contend that adoptionism is an anachronistic category for the first three centuries CE, a mirage created by fourth-century controversies about the relationship of Father and Son. The anachronism muddies the scholarly waters around texts that discuss Jesus' adoption (υἰοθεσία) or divine sonship. Building upon the work of Michael Peppard and Peter-Ben Smit, I demonstrate that the early Christian phenomena that scholars have called adoptionism are more diverse than has been acknowledged.<sup>16</sup> Although metaphors of adoption were theologically productive in early

<sup>12</sup>Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine through the Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), p. 77, cf. pp. 79–80.

<sup>13</sup>Michael F. Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017). Bird maintains that 'adoptionism originated as a particular second-century phenomenon driven largely by internal debates about preferred texts and socio-religious influences on reading them' (p. 9). Other recent scholarship arguing against adoptionism as the earliest christology includes Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003); Michael F. Bird (ed.), *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature – A Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014); Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, esp. ch. 2; Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 289–95. Ehrman's stance has a long pedigree, traceable back to von Harnack, Bousset and Weiss and more recently affirmed (with various nuances) by Brown, Dunn and others. Several scholars have questioned Ehrman's analysis and the prevalence of adoptionism (see previous note), but without challenging adoptionism as a category.

<sup>15</sup>For the recent state of the field, see Gabriele Boccaccini, 'How Jesus Became Uncreated', in Joel S. Baden, Hindy Najman and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (eds), *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), vol. 1, pp. 185–208.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: OUP, 2011); Michael Peppard, 'Adopted and Begotten Sons of God: Paul and John on Divine Sonship', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011), pp. 92–110; Peter-Ben Smit, 'The End of Early Christian Adoptionism? A Note on the Invention of Adoptionism, Its Sources, and Its Current Demise', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76 (2015), pp. 177–99. Peppard similarly notes the problems with assessing the term via later theological debates and categories, arguing that 'scholarship on divine sonship in the New Testament has relied anachronistically on the philosophical and theological categories of fourth-century Christianity, especially the key distinction, "begotten not made"' (*Son of God*, esp. pp. 132–71). Discussion of eternal generation and of the relationship between Son and Father

Christianity, to identify particular figures, texts and movements as *adoptionist* implies a theological unity that does not exist.

I survey the evidence for second- and third-century figures and texts often identified as advocating an adoptionist christology, demonstrating the diverse ways that language of adoption and sonship functions within these accounts. I focus on these second- and third-century examples rather than on the New Testament texts that frequently take centre-stage because the assumption of adoptionism as a coherent and well-attested theology in the second and third centuries provides the plausibility structure for readings of New Testament texts as adoptionist.<sup>17</sup> Without second- and third-century adoptionism, first-century (i.e. 'biblical') adoptionism vanishes. Not only are adoptionists absent from the available historical evidence, but early Christian metaphors of adoption and divine filiation functioned within diverse articulations of Jesus' identity.

### Purported adoptionists

Expressing a scholarly commonplace, Bart Ehrman claims that it 'was a popular view among the earliest Christians' that Jesus 'came to be adopted by God to be his son'.<sup>18</sup> Yet the evidence reveals varied christologies; extant reports describe figures who disagreed about whether Jesus was divine or merely human, about whether he was born of a virgin or of two human parents, and about whether Jesus was God's Son. Although scholars have categorised a number of early christological accounts as adoptionist, I argue that the extant evidence does not present us with any figures who maintained that a merely human Jesus was elevated through adoption to divine status as Son of God. We find no identifiable adoptionists.

To make this argument, I analyse the evidence for second- and third-century figures and texts generally identified as advocating an adoptionist christology.<sup>19</sup> I prioritise the pre-Nicene evidence for these figures and groups, as well as fourth-century sources like Epiphanius and Eusebius that plausibly reflect pre-Nicene sources. Post-Nicene sources sometimes distort the evidence, imposing anachronistic questions and anxieties onto figures from the second and third centuries. Moreover, later heresiological works depend on sources that I engage here (and even many of these latter texts build

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did not originate in the Nicene controversy of the fourth century (cf. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), esp. pp. 72–6); nonetheless, the Nicene controversy becomes the lens through which scholars view earlier conversations.

<sup>17</sup>The most common New Testament texts include Mark 1:11 and parallels; Acts 2:36; 13:32; Rom 1:3–4; Phil 2:6–11; see *inter alia* Weiss, *Das Urchristentum*; Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*; Dunn, *Christology*; Peppard, *Son of God*; Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption* (esp. pp. 48–50); Simon J. Gathercole, 'What did the First Christians Think about Jesus?', in Bird, *How God Became Jesus*, pp. 94–116; Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son*. The construct of adoptionism provides the matrix of meaning for adoptionist readings of New Testament texts. For this reason, debates about second- and third-century christologies are often really debates about the first century (especially about Paul and Mark). For a similar point about the underdetermination of the New Testament texts that are frequently read as adoptionist, see Andrew F. Gregory, *The Gospel According to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Ebionites* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), pp. 236–7.

<sup>18</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, 'Texts Disputed and Apocryphal: Christ as Divine Man', in Bart D. Ehrman (ed.), *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 361.

<sup>19</sup>I discuss the most plausible contenders. Other figures – including Hermas, Marcion, Valentinus, Elchasaites, Cerdo and the Jewish interlocutor whom Celsus (*apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.41) ventriloquises – are occasionally mentioned by modern scholars as well. I cover some of the same ground as Smit, 'End', although I revise several of his specific judgements and find far less coherence among the different figures often identified as 'adoptionist'.

upon one another as part of a shared heresiological discourse). Not all of these texts accurately reflect those whom they describe; polemic, mischaracterisation and misunderstanding are widespread. I do not argue that the groups described by heresiological writers must have existed as groups, much less as groups with stable, shared theological commitments. For some, a stable social and theological profile might be plausible; others function as ciphers for imagined theological positions or social formations. Crucially for my argument in this article, the evidence does not even describe theological positions that fit the modern definition of adoptionism. While it is conceivable that an adoptionist christology existed somewhere in the first few centuries, we have no evidence for it.

(1) Cerinthus often leads the lists of early Christian figures to whom an adoptionist christology is attributed.<sup>20</sup> Yet the Cerinthus described in second- and third-century sources held Jesus to be an ordinary human, the son of Joseph and Mary.<sup>21</sup> In some accounts, the divine Christ descends upon Jesus at his baptism and departs before Jesus' death – what one might call a spirit-possession christology.<sup>22</sup> No adoption of the human Jesus occurs and the human Jesus never becomes divine. Later authors – including Eusebius,<sup>23</sup> Epiphanius,<sup>24</sup> Filastrius<sup>25</sup> and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John – attest the same profile.<sup>26</sup>

(2) Varied sources juxtapose Cerinthus with another group known as 'the Ebionites' or with their imagined founder Ebion.<sup>27</sup> Ebionites also figure centrally in modern accounts of adoptionism.<sup>28</sup> The theological profile ascribed to the Ebionites is relatively

<sup>20</sup>On Cerinthus' christology, see Christoph Marksches, 'Kerinth: Wer war er und was lehrte er?', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 41 (1998), pp. 48–76; Michael J. Kok, 'Classifying Cerinthus's Christology', *Journal of Early Christian History* 9 (2019), pp. 30–48. In addition to the sources mentioned here, Cerinthus also appears in the second-century *Epistula apostolorum*, but without significant christological detail.

<sup>21</sup>Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.1 (*Irénee de Lyon: Contre les hérésies: Dénonciation et réfutation de la gnose au nom menteur*, ed. Adelin Rousseau (Paris: Cerf, 1965–82)); (Ps-) Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.33.1–2; 10.21 (ed. M. David Litwa, *Hippolytus: Refutation of All Heresies* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2016)); Ps-Tertullian, *Adversus omnes haereses* 3.1–2 (*Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertuliani: Opera. Pars II*, ed. A. Kroymann (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954)).

<sup>22</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1; (Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.33.1–2; 10.21.

<sup>23</sup>Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.28 (*Eusèbe de Césarée: Histoire ecclésiastique*, ed. Gustave Bardy (Paris: Cerf, 1984–2001)).

<sup>24</sup>Epiphanius, *Panarion* 28.1.2; 28.1.5–7; 28.7.2–8; 51.2.3; 51.3.2; cf. *Ancoratus* 28. The text is cited from *Epiphanius: Ancoratus und Panarion haer. 1–33*, ed. Karl Holl, Marc Bergerman and Christian-Friedrich Collatz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); *Epiphanius: Ancoratus und Panarion haer. 34–64*, ed. Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1980).

<sup>25</sup>Filastrius, *Diversarum hereseon liber* 35–6 (*Filastri Episcopi Brixienensis: Diversarum hereseon liber*, ed. F. Heylen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1957)).

<sup>26</sup>See *Die antimarcionitischen Evangelienprologe*, ed. Jürgen Regul (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), pp. 34–5.

<sup>27</sup>Early accounts align Ebion with Cerinthus as describing an ordinary human Jesus (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.2; (Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 10.21–22; Ps-Tertullian, *Haer.* 3. Filastrius (*Haer.* 37) and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John (VL 6:34–5) also align the two. In this heresiological profile, no adoption occurs. Jesus starts and ends human (ψυλλὸς ἀνθρώπος). While a divine spirit calls and guides him, that spirit is distinct and eventually departs. We find no claims of divine pre-existence or of incarnation, nor does Jesus become divine. What happens at Jesus' baptism is not an adoption and, moreover, not an adoption into divine sonship.

<sup>28</sup>Ehrman (*Orthodox Corruption*, pp. 50–2) discusses Ebionites alongside the Roman Theodoti as second-century examples of adoptionism. On Ebionite christology, see James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and*



consistent across our numerous sources.<sup>29</sup> Jesus was a mere human,<sup>30</sup> born of two human parents.<sup>31</sup> A number of accounts maintain that the Ebionites held Jesus to be a mere human and explicitly deny that Jesus was, for the Ebionites, the divine Son.<sup>32</sup> According to (Ps-) Hippolytus, the Ebionites held Jesus to be an ordinary human who perfectly observed the Torah and was therefore named 'Christ'.<sup>33</sup> (Ps-) Hippolytus does not indicate, however, that Jesus was adopted as a divine Son or that he became divine.<sup>34</sup>

Epiphanius of Salamis, in the fourth century, offers several accounts of the Ebionites that are difficult to reconcile with one another. They agree – with each other and with most earlier accounts – that Jesus was born an ordinary human and had two human parents.<sup>35</sup> In one account, Epiphanius describes the Ebionite Jesus as an ordinary human on whom the Christ 'descended in the form of a dove' and 'united with him' at baptism.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the human Jesus does not become divine by adoption; instead, a divine spirit descends upon the human Jesus at his baptism – thereby following Irenaeus, (Ps-) Hippolytus and Ps-Tertullian in aligning Ebionite christology with that attributed to Cerinthus.

Several of Epiphanius' descriptions diverge from the picture painted by earlier accounts (including Epiphanius' main sources). They describe the Ebionites' Jesus as becoming or being declared Son of God. In one passage, Epiphanius asserts that the Christ 'was a mere human who came to be called son of God due to his virtuous life'.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, Epiphanius asserts that the Ebionites' Jesus was 'named Son of God

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*Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 260–1; Michael D. Goulder, 'A Poor Man's Christology', *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999), pp. 332–48.

<sup>29</sup>Another group, known as 'Nazoreans', are sometimes associated with the Ebionites. While reports conflict, none reflects an 'adoptionist' position (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 29.7.6; *Anac.* 29).

<sup>30</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.2; Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 14.5; 18.1 (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [CCSL] 2, ed. Kroymann); (Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.34.1–2; 10.21–22; Ps-Tertullian, *Haer.* 3.1–2; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.27.2; Filastrius, *Haer.* 37; cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.1.3.

<sup>31</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.21.1; Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 6.1 (CCSL 2); Origen, *Homiliae in Lucam* 17.4 (Sources Chrétiennes [SC] 87, ed. Crouzel et al.); Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.27.2; 5.8.10; Filastrius, *Haer.* 37.1. In *Cels.* 5.61 (SC 147, ed. Borret), Origen describes Ebionites as divided between those who acknowledge a virgin birth and those who claim that Jesus was born like other humans (cf. *Cels.* 5.65 for another reference to two groups). Eusebius describes others who ascribe to a virgin birth through the intervention of the spirit, but not to Jesus' pre-existence or divinity (*Hist. eccl.* 3.27.3). While the question of pre-existence does not appear in the second- or third-century sources, the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John asserts that, for both Cerinthus and the Ebionites, Christ did not pre-exist his birth from Mary. Below, we will also see the idea of a special birth in the cases of the Roman Theodotians and of the figures described by Irenaeus at *Haer.* 1.30.12–13.

<sup>32</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.4; Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 14.5; 18.1; *De praescriptione haereticorum* 33.11 (*Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertuliani: Opera. Pars I*, ed. R. Refoulé (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954)); Filastrius, *Haer.* 37.

<sup>33</sup>Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.34.1–2.

<sup>34</sup>This alternate account does not specify the descent of a divine spirit or the departure of that spirit. In this, it differs from accounts of Cerinthus and from most other accounts of the Ebionites, which assert that a divine spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism only to depart prior to his death (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1; (Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.33.1–2; 10.21.3).

<sup>35</sup>Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.3.1; 30.14.4; 30.16.3; 30.17.1.

<sup>36</sup>Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.14.4. This account is offered while discussing Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of the Ebionites. Compare the descent of the Christ as a dove at *Pan.* 30.16.3 and the distinction between Jesus and the Christ in *Pan.* 30.3.1, as well as the spirit-possession christology of *Pan.* 30.3.6. On the baptism of Jesus in the Gospel of the Ebionites, see Gregory, *Gospel*, pp. 226–40.

<sup>37</sup>Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.18.6.



by election' when the Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove.<sup>38</sup> The citation of Psalm 2:7 ('this day I have begotten you') at Jesus' baptism in the Gospel that Epiphanius attributes to the Ebionites further attests this christology.<sup>39</sup> What Epiphanius describes thus resembles an adoptionist christology in which a human Jesus is named as Son of God. Yet, as Epiphanius maintains, the Ebionites' Jesus remains human and not divine, this is not a christology in which a human Jesus becomes divine through adoption.<sup>40</sup> One can only see adoptionism here if one is already looking for it.

(3) Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around 180 CE, describes another group who maintained that the human Jesus was born of a virgin through divine intervention. Jesus was wiser, purer and more righteous than all other humans and was adopted by God sometime prior to his baptism. Then, at Jesus' baptism, the divine Christ (which was united to divine Wisdom) descended on this human Jesus.<sup>41</sup> Jesus' adoption as 'Son of God' and the descent of the divine Christ are temporally and conceptually distinct. Moreover, on this account, the presence of the divine Christ is temporary. As for Cerinthus, the divine Christ departs from Jesus prior to his death.<sup>42</sup> As Irenaeus' account makes clear, Jesus' adoption does not mean that the human Jesus becomes divine. The adoption in this christology does not reflect the adoptionism of modern scholarly construction.

(4) Scholars frequently describe a group of Theodotians, in late second- and early third-century Rome, as adoptionists.<sup>43</sup> For the Theodotians, Jesus was a mere human who had only one human parent, his mother.<sup>44</sup> The divine spirit overshadowed Jesus' conception, ensuring that his virginal birth was not monstrous.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Jesus had the same nature as all other humans and was not divine.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.16.3; cf. *Pan.* 30.18.5–6.

<sup>39</sup>Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.13.7–8; cf. Jeremiah Coogan, 'The Ways that Parted in the Library: The Gospels According to Matthew and According to the Hebrews in Late Ancient Heresiology', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 73 (2022). doi:10.1017/S0022046922000458.

<sup>40</sup>Agreeing that what Epiphanius describes is not adoptionism, see Goulder, 'A Poor Man's Christology', p. 335; Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son*; Gregory, *Gospel*, p. 238.

<sup>41</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.12.

<sup>42</sup>Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.13.

<sup>43</sup>On the Roman Theodoti, see Winrich A. Löhr, 'Theodotus der Lederarbeiter und Theodotus der Bankier: Ein Beitrag zur römischen Theologiegeschichte des zweiten und dritten Jahrhunderts', *Vigiliae christianae* 87 (1996), pp. 101–25; Löhr, 'Adoptionismus'; John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 142–3; Bart D. Ehrman, 'The Theodotians as Corruptors of Scripture', in *Studies in Textual Criticism*, pp. 300–6; Jared Secord, 'Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome', *Studia Patristica* 81 (2017), pp. 51–63. I leave undecided whether one should identify one Theodotus or two (cf. Löhr, 'Theodotus der Lederarbeiter und Theodotus der Bankier'). The christological claims of the two are not differentiated. Sources that differentiate between two figures identify the senior Theodotus (of Byzantium) as a leather-worker and the junior Theodotus as a banker ((Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.35.1–7.36.2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 54.1.3). Ps-Tertullian (*Haer.* 8.2–3) identifies only one Theodotus. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.28) mentions associated figures named Asclepiades, Hermophilus and Artemon.

<sup>44</sup>(Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.35.1–7.36.2; 10.23; Ps-Tertullian, *Haer.* 8.2–3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.2–3, citing an earlier source that scholars often identify as the *Little Labyrinth*; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 54.1.7–9; Filastrius, *Haer.* 50.2.

<sup>45</sup>On divine intervention in preventing a monstrous birth, see Secord, 'Galen and the Theodotians'.

<sup>46</sup>(Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 10.23; cf. Ps-Tertullian, *Haer.* 8.2–3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.2. Epiphanius diverges from the earlier sources, since at *Pan* 54.1.8 he asserts that Theodotus claimed that Jesus was born of 'a man's seed'. Much subsequent discussion by Epiphanius argues against the idea that Jesus

According to (Ps-) Hippolytus, the Theodotians thought that a divine spirit descended on the human Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove.<sup>47</sup> This is not a moment of adoption, however, and the language of adoption does not appear in any of the extant accounts. Nor here do we have the human-to-divine transition that characterises 'low' christology as it is usually understood: for the Theodotians, Jesus was born and died a human. According to (Ps-) Hippolytus, Theodotus thought that Jesus never became divine ('Theodotus asserts that the Christ is not divine'), while some of his followers thought that Jesus was divinised after his resurrection.<sup>48</sup> This is the closest that the evidence for *any* early Christian group gets to the modern scholarly construct of 'adoptionism'. And yet it diverges at the crucial point: Jesus is never adopted as divine Son.<sup>49</sup>

(5) One second-century figure did maintain that Jesus was 'adopted' by God.<sup>50</sup> This figure was a different Theodotus, a follower of Valentinus, whose works Clement of Alexandria excerpted and summarised in his *Excerpta ex Theodoto*.<sup>51</sup> According to the texts cited by Clement, Theodotus asserted that Christ became 'adopted son', 'elect' and 'firstborn'.<sup>52</sup> Yet this text does not describe Jesus' human life; rather, the passage describes the Christ of Valentinian cosmogony who is drawn from the mother who gave birth to him into the Pleroma. The Jesus who appears as a human is, in fact, a pre-existent divine being;<sup>53</sup> here we have a theology of pre-existence and incarnation. Jesus' adoption is not part of his human biography and does not mark a transition between human and divine existence.

(6) Finally, we must consider Paul of Samosata (c.200–75), the bishop of Antioch who was condemned by a synod in 268.<sup>54</sup> The early evidence for Paul's christology is

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had a human father, although there may be an echo of the overshadowing theory at *Pan.* 54.3.5. Filastrius (*Haer.* 50.2) says nothing about the Theodotians' understanding of Jesus' birth; he does not even hint that Jesus was understood to be adopted.

<sup>47</sup>(Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.35.2.

<sup>48</sup>(Ps-) Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.35.1–2; 10.23. The quoted passage is from the summary in *Haer.* 10.23.2: θεὸν δὲ οὐκ εἶναι τὸν Χριστὸν θέλει. The Theodotians who hold that Jesus was divinised after resurrection are mentioned only in *Haer.* 7.35.2.

<sup>49</sup>This is a point where I diverge from Michael Bird. Bird (*Jesus the Eternal Son*, pp. 121–2) acknowledges that Cerinthus and the Ebionites do not provide persuasive evidence for adoptionists, but sees the Theodotians as a clear example of adoptionism. This conflates these Theodotians' claim that Jesus was divinised with the modern construct of adoptionism. Ehrman (*Orthodox Corruption*, p. 51) incorrectly asserts that the Theodoti held Jesus to have been adopted by God at his baptism. As Löhr rightly notes, however, none of the sources assert that Jesus was adopted (Löhr, 'Adoptianismus'). Peppard, *Son of God*, does not challenge the idea that the Theodoti were adoptionists.

<sup>50</sup>On Theodotus, see Christoph Marksches, 'Theodotus, Valentinianer', *Lexicon der antiken christlichen Literatur* (1998), pp. 600–1; Geoffrey S. Smith, *Valentinian Christianity: Texts and Translations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), p. 57. Bird (*Jesus the Eternal Son*) does not discuss this example.

<sup>51</sup>For a new edition and translation of the text, with helpful introduction and notes, see Smith, *Valentinian Christianity*, pp. 57–108. The *Excerpta* are not only extracts, but also include Clement's notes about the text. The *Excerpta* may summarise and discuss other Valentinian teachings as well (cf. Smith, *Valentinian Christianity*, p. 57).

<sup>52</sup>Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 33: υἰόθετος μέντοι γέγονεν ὁ Χριστός, ὡς πρὸς τὰ πληρώματα «Εκλεκτός» γινόμενος καὶ «Πρωτότοκος» τῶν ἐνθάδε πραγμάτων (Smith, *Valentinian Christianity: Texts and Translations*, pp. 80–1).

<sup>53</sup>E.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 4, 6, 19.

<sup>54</sup>On Paul's christology, see Sample, 'Christology'; H. C. Brennecke, 'Zum Prozeß gegen Paul von Samosata: Die Frage nach der Verurteilung des Homoousios', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 75 (1984), pp. 270–90; Frederick W. Norris, 'Paul of Samosata: Procurator Ducenarius', *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984), pp. 50–70; U. M. Lang, 'The Christological Controversy at the

sparse, the later evidence problematic; none of it indicates that Paul thought Jesus was adopted as divine Son. Citing an earlier text known as the *Little Labyrinth*, Eusebius associates Paul with the Roman Theodoti and their follower Artemon; Paul's error is that he understood Jesus to be a mere human (ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος).<sup>55</sup> This is the earliest and clearest theological charge against Paul. It appears again in Pamphilus' and Eusebius' *Apology for Origen*.<sup>56</sup> Eusebius similarly wrote, early in his career, that Paul denied Jesus' pre-existence.<sup>57</sup> Eusebius' account of the controversy that led to Paul's eviction from his see unfortunately offers only limited insight into his christology.<sup>58</sup> Paul apparently held Jesus to be an ordinary human.<sup>59</sup> Jesus Christ is 'from below'; there is no hint of adoption or of divinity.<sup>60</sup>

As this survey demonstrates, there is no clear evidence that *anyone* understood Jesus' adoption – at any point in his biography – as a transition from ordinary human existence to divine status.<sup>61</sup> Early christologies exhibited substantial diversity. And yet, in all of the varied christological claims we have surveyed, the extant evidence does not suggest any model of human-to-divine adoption of Jesus. One group of Theodotians is described (by Epiphanius) as asserting that Jesus was divinised after his death, although this is not associated with adoption or sonship. Divinity and divine sonship are

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Synod of Antioch in 268/269', *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000), pp. 54–80; Dragoş Andrei Giulea, 'Antioch 268 and Its Legacy in the Fourth-Century Theological Debates', *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018), pp. 192–215. Brennecke and Norris in particular emphasise how little is known about Paul and his beliefs. For the most thorough collection of primary sources, see Henri de Riedmatten, *Les actes du procès de Paul de Samosate: étude sur la christologie du III<sup>e</sup> au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Fribourg: Éditions St-Paul, 1952); on whether the purported *acta* from the synod in Antioch are reliable, see the negative argument of Sample, 'Christology', and the positive argument of Lang, 'Christological Controversy'. Sample's argument remains more convincing. The definitive collection of testimonia for Paul of Samosata is Patricio de Navascués (ed.), *Pablo de Samosata y sus adversarios: Estudio histórico-teológico del cristianismo antioqueno en el s. III* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2004); a number of these texts are translated in Emanuel Fiano, Michael Papazian and Mark DelCogliano, 'Paul of Samosata, *Selected Fragments*', in *Christ: Through the Nestorian Controversy*, vol. 3 of *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, ed. Mark DelCogliano (Cambridge: CUP, 2022), pp. 197–211.

<sup>55</sup>Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.1.

<sup>56</sup>Pamphilus and Eusebius, *Apologia pro Origene* 87 (in *Pamphile et Eusèbe de Césarée: Apologie pour Origène, suivi de Rufin d'Aquilée, sur la falsification des livres d'Origène*, vol. 1, *Texte critique, traduction et notes*, ed. René Amacker and Éric Junod (Paris: Cerf, 2002), pp. 154–7). Here again Artemon and Paul appear together. The relevant section of the text is preserved only in Rufinus' Latin translation.

<sup>57</sup>Eusebius, *Eclgae prophetae* 3.19 (*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* [PG], ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 22 [Paris, 1857], 1044B); the text is damaged and lacunose. Paul of Samosata is associated with Artemon and the Ebionites.

<sup>58</sup>Ehrman (*Orthodox Corruption*, p. 52) acknowledges that Paul was not an adoptionist, but asserts inaccurately that the Synod of Antioch in 268 condemned him for being one. While Eusebius does connect Paul with the Roman Theodoti and the associated figure Artemon (*Hist. eccl.* 5.28.1), the charge was that Paul considered Jesus a 'mere human' (ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος). The evidence does not reflect either that the charges against Paul corresponded to the modern category of adoptionism or that a similar heresiological category centred on adoption was employed in third-century conflicts. Paul is pulled into fourth-century debates by modern scholars, just as he was pulled into fourth-century christological controversies by actors in the fourth century.

<sup>59</sup>Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.27.2.

<sup>60</sup>Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.30.10–11. See also Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 1.20.10–11 (in PG 24:877–80) and Filastrius, *Haer.* 64. In *Eccl. theol.* 1.20.10–11, Paul is polemically associated with the Ebionites.

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption*, p. 47.

consistently distinct. A number of texts describe Jesus experiencing a moment of divine calling, the descent of a (or the) divine spirit, or even a moment of divine adoption at some point in his human life. Yet in none of these texts was Jesus thereby made divine. On the contrary, a number of accounts explicitly assert that Jesus remained human. Here is it not simply that one finds diversity among ostensible adoptionists.<sup>62</sup> Rather, the supposed core, Jesus' adoption as an elevation from human status to divine, consistently fails to appear. As a result, scholars should stop reading early Christian language of divine adoption and filiation as reflecting the modern heresiological category of adoptionism.

Several of the readings that I offer here are not unprecedented. Other scholars have examined one or another of these figures only to discover that their ostensible adoptionism evaporates in the light of careful scrutiny. Michael Kok determines that Cerinthus' christology does not fit the category of adoptionism.<sup>63</sup> Winrich Löhr acknowledges in the case of the Roman Theodoti that 'von Adoption ist explizit nicht die Rede'.<sup>64</sup> Robert Sample and Hanns Brennecke reach similar conclusions in their analyses of Paul of Samosata.<sup>65</sup> Michael Bird rejects the attribution of adoptionism for all of these figures except the Theodotians. Peter-Ben Smit is likewise sceptical of describing early Christian figures as 'adoptionist'.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, adoptionism as a category exhibits a peculiar durability even as the examples vanish.<sup>67</sup>

### Creating precursors

Language of adoption (*υιοθεσία*), applied to both Jesus and his followers, was theologically productive in early Christianity. Yet to identify particular figures or texts as adoptionist implies more unity than exists. Not only are historical adoptionists unattested, but early Christian language of divine adoption and filiation functioned within diverse articulations of Jesus' identity – not only the *description* but the *category* is flawed. For this reason, I propose that scholars should abandon the category of adoptionism.

<sup>62</sup>Ehrman himself concedes that 'representatives of adoptionism represented no monolith' (ibid.).

<sup>63</sup>Kok, 'Classifying'.

<sup>64</sup>Löhr, 'Adoptianismus'. Indeed, Löhr cannot provide any examples of early adoptionists. In light of the evidence, we can go further: 'adoption' is not even *implicitly* at issue here.

<sup>65</sup>Sample, 'Christology'; Brennecke, 'Prozess'.

<sup>66</sup>Smit, 'End'; Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son*. Smit observes that adoption does not play a significant role in many of these accounts and therefore concludes that adoptionism is 'hard to find in the sources' for Christianity in the second to fourth centuries, but he leaves open the possibility that the category might adequately describe evidence from the first two centuries ('End of Early Christian Adoptionism?', p. 192), and he continues to treat the texts often defined as 'adoptionist' as a coherent group. While Bird and Smit critique examples of adoptionism, the *category* has emerged largely unscathed, as has the clustering of ostensibly related christologies. The critique of adoptionism that comes closest to the one I offer here is Kok's discussion of categorisation in his recent article on Cerinthus. Yet Kok ultimately stops short, preferring to preserve the inadequate category of adoptionism by conflating it with a different phenomenon, what he calls a 'possession Christology' ('Classifying Cerinthus's Christology', p. 35).

<sup>67</sup>Peppard ('The Eagle and the Dove: Roman Imperial Sonship and the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9–11)', *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010), pp. 431–51; cf. *Son of God*) does not question the existence of early adoptionism, although he argues that Mark was *not* an adoptionist and notes that adoptionism tends to be 'an imprecise catch-all for "low" Christologies' ('Eagle', p. 441). Likewise, Dunn critiques 'a too ready use of [the term] adoptionist' (*Christology*, p. 9).

While category of adoptionism proves unsatisfactory in light of the evidence, this is not to say that the language of *adoption* is absent from early christologies; rather, ancient ideas about Jesus' biography and relationship with God intersected with one another in ways that are absent from recent discussions about early christologies and that are obscured by the category of adoptionism.

One might object that this argument splits hairs. Theologies in which Jesus is declared to be 'Son of God' at some particular point in his earthly life – for example, in the descent of a divine spirit at his baptism – are adoptionist, so the thinking goes, regardless of whether the specific language of adoption is used. After all, every category oversimplifies to a certain extent; historiography cannot entirely avoid anachronism. All this is true. Yet such objections have merit insofar as the category itself performs fruitful work. This is what I challenge. The category of adoptionism is predicated on the idea that early Christian language of adoption (or, more circuitously, of God's declaring Jesus to be Son of God) reflects the same theological substructure – characterised by a human Jesus who becomes divine. This imagined substructure gives coherence to the varied data as representatives of a single category, 'adoptionism'. My reading of the evidence undermines that central assumption.

Recent work in both scholarly and popular registers has drawn renewed attention to adoption metaphors about Jesus in early Christian texts. Debate about these passages, however, has largely been framed by Nicene categories, assuming that adoption must oppose the eternal generation of the Son ('begotten, not made'). Generally, it is assumed that adoption-language applied to Jesus must imply that Jesus was 'merely human' (*ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος*). Others, advocating an early divine-identity christology, have sought to avoid any implication of Jesus' adoption in early Christian texts. Both approaches are flawed because they impose anachronistic and Procrustean categories onto early Christianity. Metaphors of sonship and *υιοθεσία* do not require either a divine-identity ('high') or a merely-human ('low') christology. Our survey of potential adoptionists has demonstrated that language of *υιοθεσία* functioned variously in early Christian texts and does not support a coherent adoptionist theology like that articulated by Löhr or Ehrman.

This is not to deny the existence of diverse christological articulations in early Christian thought. On the contrary, I argue that the category of adoptionism creates a deceptive unity. This Nicene distortion encourages us to read diverse metaphors of adoption through a single lens of adoptionism. Through the agency of modern scholars, a metaphor becomes a christological thesis, then an identity marker, then a particular (imaginary) group of people. This is not solely a problem for the category of adoptionism, but might be applied to other theological and sociological categories that modern scholars envision in early Christianity.

My argument is first and foremost about the historiographical practices embedded in categories and terminology. I do not argue for or against an early divine-identity christology, a topic on which robust debate continues. Nor do I here attempt to parse the ways in which Paul, John or other early Christian figures understood Jesus' divine sonship to work, *vis-à-vis* adoption or otherwise. These topics are beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I argue that – in principle and in practice – the question of adoption is not the same as the question of divine-identity christology. As a corollary to this claim, the language of adoptionism is itself counterproductive in the ongoing analysis of early christology. Early Christian adoptionism does not exist.

Yet in another sense adoptionism does exist – as a creation of modern scholars. By means of definitions of adoptionism and categorisations of figures and texts, scholars

create adoptionism. In the light of the modern construct, ancient ‘precursors’ (to use Borges’ language) appear. Yet, in fact, this is a heresiological creation of modern scholarship, and we return thus to Le Boulluec’s discursive creation of heresy. Early Christian adoptionism is a mirage that dissolves upon closer inspection. While adoptionism gives an illusion of a solid entity, it conflates varied positions and encourages anachronistically reading Nicene categories into early Christian theological metaphors. As a result, adoptionism is a flawed category, a distorting mirror rather than a clarifying lens.<sup>68</sup>

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