

# WITHIN AND AROUND EARLY CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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This special issue of the Theological Journal of the Estonian Theological Society brings to a conclusion the four-year research project *Formative Factors of the Early Christian Ideology in the Syncretistic Roman Empire* (2011–2014). The project was implemented at the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and consisted of four research fellows: Doctors Arne Hiob, Jaan Lahe, Urmas Nõmmik, Randar Tasmuth, and two doctoral students: Ergo Naab and Elo Süld. The latter successfully defended her doctoral thesis on September 25, 2014 (see Bibliography).

The project studied how the emerging of a new movement, Christianity, began to take shape and became aware of itself in the syncretistic atmosphere of the first-century Roman Empire. In our use, the word ‘Christian’ denotes every person in whose symbolic worlds Jesus of Nazareth held a central place and was adored as the Lord. From the historical point of view, the project basically dealt with the roughly 600-year period from 400 BC to 200 AD, but inescapably picked up earlier Old Testament traditions (U. Nõmmik) and even examined the birth of Islam (E. Süld). Jewish wisdom literature brings to light the ideas upon which early Christians reflected, and studies on Muhammad reveal the history of the influence of Christian thought, especially ideas initiated by Paul.

The bibliography in this special issue reflects our publication policy and refers to all of the articles written by our research group. The latest works are gathered into this special issue (see the Contents). Three domestic conferences held on October 19, 2012, November 8, 2013, and October 10, 2014 at the Institute of Theology in Tallinn made several issues better known to the Estonian public. As part of this project, the Institute

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in Tallinn hosted an international seminar entitled “The Three Monotheistic Religions” by the Nordic Network *Religious Roots of Europe: Dynamics in the Formation and Transformation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* on April 18–21, 2012. The discussions and outcomes of the two domestic conferences were made publicly known by two Estonian academic journals.<sup>2</sup>

Urmas Nõmmik recalled the distant past by referring to a text from Genesis 18:22b–33. From the point of view of the history of religion and the New Testament, it is noteworthy that the righteousness of God is emphasised, and the conviction that God destroys only the wicked and not the righteous is retained.<sup>3</sup> Because of the emergence of the first Jewish religious parties, however, the Persian era had a considerable impact on the religious atmosphere of later centuries and the period of the rise of early Christianity. In two further articles, Nõmmik deals with issues related to the history of the Book of Job in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Phenomena related to water appear as particularly illustrative and dynamic cases of metaphoric language in trying to get to the roots of theological ideas on the majesty of God as well as the downfall of the wicked.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Job’s final complaint and avowal in Job 29–31 is a polemic text added later to the book, which helps more clearly to understand the social and religious tensions between poor and wealthy, religious persons and persons who supposedly were not god-fearing.<sup>5</sup>

As demonstrated by Randar Tasmuth, Pauline Epistles give us a first-hand account of early Christian tradition, which was oral but became

<sup>2</sup> Jaan Lahe, Urmas Nõmmik and Randar Tasmuth, “Toimus religiooniajaloole pühendatud teaduskonverents” – *Tuna*, 2 (2013), 142–144; Jaan Lahe, Ergo Naab, Urmas Nõmmik, Elo Süld and Randar Tasmuth, “Grandi ETF8665 religiooniajaloole pühendatud konverents EELK Usuteaduse Instituudis” – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 66 (1/2014), 140–145.

<sup>3</sup> Urmas Nõmmik, “Remembering a Memorable Conversation: Genesis 18:22b–33 and the Righteous in the Persian Period” – *Remembering and Forgetting in Early Second Temple Judah*. Eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin. *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, 85 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 195–208.

<sup>4</sup> Urmas Nõmmik, “Thinking of Water in the Book of Job: A Fluvial Introduction to the Job Literature” – *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period*. Eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin. *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 461 (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 279–298.

<sup>5</sup> Urmas Nõmmik, “Discussion on a Ruler’s Fundamental Corruptness in the Wisdom Literature, Using Job 29–31 as an Example” in the present special issue.

coloured, developed and formulated by and interwoven with Paul the Apostle. Anthropology, as an essential aspect of Paul's theology, offers us a rich set of general terms such as *anthrōpos*, *anēr*, *gynē*, *arsēn* and *thēlys*. In addition, more specific words such as *sōma*, *sarx*, *psychē*, *pneuma*, *nous*, *kardia*, describe different aspects of hu/man beings, hu/mans and hu/man-kind. Nearly all instances of the words *arsēn* and *thēlys* occur in Romans 1:26–27, are based on the creation narratives of Genesis, are best translated as male and female and describe one aspect or part of (the image or idea of) humans. These words accentuate the physical and biological differences between men and women, accentuate sexuality and are common to humans and animals.<sup>6</sup> The word *sōma* was of basic importance for Paul. The word has been in practical use throughout the centuries, and for the Jews and Paul the Septuagint was the book in which Hebrew terms were translated or such Greek words were introduced that did not have a direct Hebrew equivalent. The word *sōma* referred to the physical body, but was also used to stand for “person.”<sup>7</sup>

There are some aspects of the human being that are seldom dealt with, and to which Paul ascribes not only anthropological, but also eschatological meaning. Paul ascribed to the inward human being, *the inner man*, qualities that connect this human aspect with God's transforming activity (2Cor 4:16, 5:17) and also with rational thinking (Rom 7:22). According to Paul, the inner man is connected intimately with the mind, the process of moral decision-making, and also represents this rational aspect of the human “I” which is in harmony with the law of God. This phrase has some sort of prototype in Plato and Philo, but Paul's use of it is novel and Judaeo-Christian in nature.<sup>8</sup> Whereas it seems to be true that the outer human being is what we also call body, *sōma*, the inner human being is not a soul. Therefore it seems that the difference between Paul on the one hand and the pattern of thought of Platonic idealist philosophy on the other is quite clearly visible. Paul also associated the body

<sup>6</sup> Randar **Tasmuth**, “Inimesepildi kujunemise aspekte Paulusel” – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 61 (2/2010), 3–17.

<sup>7</sup> Randar **Tasmuth**, “Pauluse inimesepildi lähtekohad ja kontaktpunktid” – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 63 (1/2012), 16–35.

<sup>8</sup> Randar **Tasmuth**, “Inimese varjatud *mina*: unustatud *seesmise inimese* aspekt Paulusel” – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 66 (1/2014), 25–44, and the article “Pauline Anthropology: On the Inner Human Being and the Human “I” in the present special issue.

with the temple, and asked: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1Cor 3:16f.). This metaphor works in two ways. First, the bodies of Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit and the bodies are and should be holy too. This development is based on the history of Israel. The God of Israel sanctifies his temple and his people. God also dwells among his own people, and Paul extends the idea to include Christians, without expelling the Jews.<sup>9</sup> Second, Paul regarded Christian gatherings, congregations, churches (*ekklēsia*) as local representatives of the body of Christ. Paul did not call new communities *synagogues* but *ekklēsia*. This was understood not identically but sufficiently clearly by the Jews and by the Greeks as well. Like historic Israel, the new communities belong to the people of God. The main characteristic of the new community is that the members still have different functions, but Christ is the real centre of the body, i.e., of every local congregation.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the influence of Paul the Apostle has taken different shapes, and it has inspired scholars to ponder how Paul has been used and misused by European politicians, merchants and authorities among the nations of the “Third World.” Doctoral student Ergo Naab has approached Paul from this perspective.<sup>11</sup> Problems that early Christian faced in the polytheistic social and cultural environment of the first two centuries are faced in his study, which also refers to the cult of Emperors.<sup>12</sup>

The description of the religious milieu in the Roman Empire and the impact of this ideological environment on early Christian thinking has been studied by Jaan Lahe. An overall methodological and historical study of the Eastern-Oriental religions and their classification was pub-

<sup>9</sup> See the article “Temple, Body, and ‘the Man Within’” in the present special issue.

<sup>10</sup> Randar **Tasmuth**, “Pauluse nägemus Kristuse kogudusest” – *Kultuurisillad Läänemere äärses kultuuriruumis. Cultural Bridges Across the Baltic Sea*. Ed. Riho Saard. Publications of the EELC Institute of Theology, 21 (Tallinn: EELK Usuteaduse Instituut, 2011), 300–321.

<sup>11</sup> See the article by Ergo **Naab**, “Apostle Paul and his Message through the Lense of Post-Colonial Analysis” in the present special issue.

<sup>12</sup> Ergo **Naab**, “Evangeelium ja impeerium: Jumal-inimese konstrueerimine” – *Akaadeemia*, 7 (2014), 1206–1218.

lished in the international arena.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the phenomenon of the Hellenistic ruler and the Imperial cult in the Roman Empire was studied in detail as well as in relationship to the cult of the king in Ancient Egypt, in regard to the form it took during the reign of the Julian and Claudian Dynasties and the first Flavian Dynasty.<sup>14</sup> Though the cult of Mithras did not become a real competitor to the growing Christian movement, its origin and the possible connection between the Roman Mithras cult and its Iranian “predecessor” describes the trajectories of religious ideas through the Ancient world. The article in this volume is an extension of a presentation made at the conference held on October 10, 2014 at the Institute of Theology.<sup>15</sup>

The most chronologically distant topic is covered by Elo Süld. In the paper presented at the last conference of our research group, she compared the similarities and differences between the two conversion narratives—Paul the Apostle and Muhammad the Prophet. The article in this special issue presents the results of this comparison. On a larger scale, this topic is one aspect of her doctoral dissertation, the successful academic disputation of which took place on September 25, 2014 at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Tartu.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jaan Lahe, “Die “orientalischen Religionen” im Römerreich als ein Problem der Religionsgeschichte” – *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*, 20 (2012), 151–195.

<sup>14</sup> Jaan Lahe, “Hellenistliku valitsejakultuse seosed Muinas-Egiptuse kuningakultuse ja kuningaideoloogiaga” – *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 66 (1/2014), 112–139; Jaan Lahe and Ergo Naab, “Keisrikultus Juliuste-Claudiuste ja I. Flaviuste dünastia valitsusajal ja selle võimalikud kajastused algkristlikus kirjanduses” – *Tuna*, 1 (2014), 6–25.

<sup>15</sup> See the article by Jaan Lahe, “Hat der römische Mithras-Kult etwas mit dem Iran zu tun? Überlegungen zu Beziehungen zwischen dem römischen Mithras-Kult und der iranischen religiösen Überlieferung” in the present special issue.

<sup>16</sup> See the article by Elo Süld, “Paulus und Muhammad als Gesandte im Lichte ihrer Berufungsgeschichten mit Bezug auf die biblische sowie islamische Tradition” in the present special issue, and the dissertation: *Muhammad, der Gesandte Gottes, und Paulus, der Gesandte Christi. Ein Vergleich der Berufungs- und offenbarungsgeschichtlichen Vorstellungen mit Bezug auf die islamische sowie die biblische Tradition*. Dissertationes theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis, 29 (Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2014).