The end of early Christian adoptionism? A note on the invention of adoptionism, its sources, and its current demise

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'Adoptionism' is an early Christian 'heresy' often associated with early strands of Jewish Christian tradition. It figures as such in handbooks of church history and New Testament studies alike. This essay investigates the origins of the concept of 'adoptionism' in the historiography of early Christianity, offers a fresh analysis of the relevant 'adoptionist' sources, and concludes that the concept is a misleading one. Therefore, the proposal is made to abandon the notion of 'adoptionism' as a category and to focus on the authors involved as such and to investigate what their soteriological and christological concerns were, rather than to identify them as 'adoptionists' and to study them with that identification as a starting point.

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Introduction

'Adoptionism' is a category often used in the study of the history of early Christianity and, accordingly, in handbooks on the history of doctrine, in order to describe 'subordinationist'[1] models of understanding the relationship between Father and Son in – what are often, also implicitly, understood to be – emerging Trinitarian theologies in the first to third centuries. At the very least, such later, e.g., fourth century, Trinitarian theologies with the appertaining concepts are used as a point of reference to describe earlier ways of understanding the relationship between Father and Son. A statement like the following, from a standard New Testament textbook, is typical as it indicates the views that (Jewish Christian) adoptionists held

> 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 on earth. Only in this sense was he the 'Son of God': Christ was not divine by nature, but was human in every sense of the term.[2]

Another, German, example would be the following where Ritter defines adoptionism as follows:

> a christological concept that denied any kind of preexistence of Christ and assumes that the human being Jesus was adopted by God as God's son, for example at his baptism in the Jordan.[3]

According to this, what may be termed a 'classical' view of the origins of (some) early Christian Christologies, an adoptionist understanding of Christ's identity as son of God is both a very old kind of Christology (if not the oldest) and it is, in its presentation, pitted against later Christologies that would confess the Son's consubstantiality with the Father and the Son's incarnation by the Spirit, from the virgin Mary. Indeed, adoptionism as it is understood in these quotations from Ehrman and Ritter is, it seems to me, viewed from the perspective of later Christological and Trinitarian theologies, especially the Chalcedonian definition (451) and the teaching of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) regarding the relationship between the Father and the Son. Thus, it is presented as part of a trajectory leading from 'low' adoptionist Christologies to 'high' incarnational Christologies. This trajectory and its use in early Christian studies and the history of theology are questioned here.[4] One reason for doing so is that it seems by no means certain that the earliest sources necessarily contained a 'low' Christology, a second is that reading the (supposed) earlier christologies from the perspective of the later, as irrevocably happens as soon as terms such as 'proto-orthodox' are used,[5] is a questionable procedure, a third reason, and the one that will be developed in this article, is that I doubt that there ever was something like adoptionism as described by Ehrman, Ritter, and many others.

In order to do so, this article will pursue three avenues by (a) providing a brief overview of the history of the concept of 'adoptionism' in the study of early Christianity in recent centuries; (b) providing a number of case studies, illustrating what presumed 'adoptionists' did and did not say about the 'adoption' of Jesus or Jesus Christ as Son of God by the Father; and (c) offering suggestions for the use and non-use of the term 'adoptionism' in the history of early Christianity.[6] The focus of this study will be on second- to fourth-century CE sources, with a prior considering of Jewish Christian texts. The relevant New Testament texts (Acts 2:36, Mark 1:9–11parr., Mark 9:7parr. and Rom. 1:3–4) belong to a discourse of their own that will only be touched upon in a postscript that focuses on the hermeneutical consequences of the considerations presented in this article for one's reading of New Testament texts.[7] By focusing on what was thought and written between the New Testament writings and the discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries, both the existence of adoptionism in this period and the development in Christological thought during these centuries in which adoptionism allegedly played a role of importance can be addressed. This also means that later authors, such as Nestorius (also accused of adoptionism), the Syriac tradition, as well as later Spanish or Western adoptionism will not be considered here.

Adoptionism in the history of the study of early Christianity

Rather well-hidden in his dissertation, Eskola has provided a convincing outline and critique of some historical presuppositions regarding the development of some aspects of early Christian Christology.[8] Specifically, he questions the development from a low to a high Christology as it is (often) assumed by exegetes and historians of early Christianity[9] and, within this context, the assumption of adoptionist christologies as representing an early stage of christological reflection.[10] Eskola points out that from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, specifically by Strauss and Weiss,[11] the theory of Jesus'

adoption as son by God through his resurrection was put forward, which was to be understood in the light of oriental conventions about 'divine kingship.' Strauss, in the first volume of his *Leben Jesu* discusses the meaning of the expression υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in the four canonical Gospels. He notes that the oriental theocratic tradition (Strauss refers to Hos. 11:1; Exodus 4:22; 2 Sam. 7:14; Psalm 2:7, and 89:28) constitutes the historical background to the association of the notions of 'Messiah' and 'Son of God.' The Messiah, *qua* king, stood in the line of the kings of Israel, who were referred to as son of God because of the special relationship that YHWH wanted with him and because YHWH appointed the king as vice- or sub-regent, quite in line with the practice of other oriental societies. This, clearly, does not say much about Jesus' birth, divine character, or nature, but it does contextualize the notion 'son of God' historically. Weiss goes a decisive step further and presents an argument according to which the enthronization of Jesus at this resurrection, as witnessed to by Acts 2:36, made Jesus son of God, and states:

> This is the earliest doctrine about Christ that we possess, and hence is of great interest, the more so since later on it was suppressed by other doctrinal developments. It is known as an Adoptionist Christology, since it supposes an action of *adoption* (υἱοθεσία): the word is used here in contrast to natural sonship, which is a matter of birth. This implies that Jesus was not originally Messiah, or Son of God – the terms are synonymous, in this connection – but that he first *became* such by a definite, explicit act of God.[12]

Weiss develops this further by associating both the transfiguration and the messianic anointing of Jesus with the Spirit at baptism – on both occasions Jesus is identified as the 'son of God' – as preparations of Jesus for his future glorification as (adopted) 'son of God.'[13] Again, for Weiss, the primary aim is to understand the development of these earliest Christologies historically. While Strauss and Weiss do not emphasize the Jewish Christian nature or origins of 'adoptionist' Christologies, this connection is made with some emphasis by Bousset in his classic *Kyrios Christos*.[14] Despite some critical voices, including those of Eduard Schweizer and Otto Michel, this soon became a standard way of viewing a very early stage of Christological reflection,[15] albeit with a twist: the understanding of adoption proposed by Strauss and Weiss was by-and-by supplanted with an understanding of adoption that had ontological consequences for the adoptee; this is a later development; even Bousset could still argue that it was, for the functioning of Christology in the context of early Christian worship, largely irrelevant whether people were thinking along adoptionist lines or not.[16] This then was combined with the idea of early Jewish Christian groups holding such a 'low' Christology, specifically the so-called 'Ebionites,' as it had also been underlined by, e.g., Bousset.[17] The result was a paradigm for the development of the history of development of Christology in which 'Jewish Christian' 'adoptionist' Christology (often with the aforementioned ontological twist) was seen as a starting point for the development of Christology in the early church, resulting, e.g., in the 'orthodox' Christologies of the fourth and fifth centuries. This, then, also became the interpretative matrix for New Testament texts such as Acts 2:36, Mark 1:9–11 parr., and Rom. 1:3–4. However, as Eskola's study indicates,[18] the focus on the 'ontological' side of the matter and, hence on the conflict between early adoptionist Christologies and later Christologies that placed more emphasis on Jesus Christ's ontological identity as Son of God, does have the tendency to cloud one's eyes for what 'adoptionist' thinkers and theologians actually wish to express. For this reason, it is helpful to review what some of the most frequently mentioned 'adoptionists' in the earliest centuries actually taught or seem to have taught.

Soteriology and 'incarnation' instead of Christology and Trinitarian theology?

In this section, the 'usual suspects' will be considered. That is to say: those authors and groups that are customarily associated with 'adoptionism.' These are (1) Jewish Christian groups, especially as their testimony has been preserved by other early Christian authors[19]; (2) a somewhat loose group, consisting of the Roman Theodoti (i.e., Theodotus the Byzantine and Theodotus the Banker, of whom the former is of primary importance), the Pastor Hermas, the *Excepta ex Theodoto* (by Clement Alexandria from the work of an otherwise unidentified Theodotus, not identical with the two Roman Theodoti), and Irenaeus of Lyons; (3) a group of authors who are often associated with one another, i.e., Artemas, Paul of Samosata, and Marcellus of Ancyra. Later, late antique or early medieval adoptionists such as Elipandus of Toledo will be left out of consideration, given that their christological models are historically unrelated phenomena.[20] Given the amount of material that needs to be covered, interaction with secondary literature will remain limited.

The analysis of each of the cases that will be taken into account here will show how 'adoption,' to the extent that it occurred as a concept at all, was more often than not associated, not so much, with pre-Trinitarian speculation about the relationship between the Father and the Son *per se*, but was much more interested in soteriology, on the one hand, and the notion of – for lack of a better word – 'incarnation,' on the other.

'Jewish Christian' adoptionists

A further category to be considered here is 'Jewish Christian' adoptionists. The primary reason for considering them here is that 'adoptionism' has time and again been identified as being of Jewish Christian origins. As was indicated above, this suggestion was developed in the nineteenth century and became part of the standard repertoire of the study of early Christianity in the twentieth century. The texts considered here deal with remarks from church fathers regarding their views in as far as they have to do with Christ's sonship. In the following, Klijn and Reinink's edition of the relevant parts of the works of early Christian theologians is followed (also in the sequence of the authors). This gives a representative overview. As throughout this article, the focus will remain on christological issues that might be related to the issue of adoptionism, not on other christological issues or on questions regarding the keeping of the Jewish law, which was also a bone of contention between 'Jewish Christian' groups and others.

Cerinthus

In *Adversus haereses* 1.26:1, Irenaeus of Lyons refers to the teaching of Cerinthus. As Cerinthus (and the 'Cerinthians') are sometimes presented as adoptionists, this passage needs to be considered.[21] What the passage in Irenaeus' work indicates is twofold: first, that Jesus was a particularly virtuous and righteous man and that Christ descended upon him in the shape of a dove at his baptism (to leave him again only at the crucifixion, leaving the human Jesus to suffer on the cross). The text, while certainly 'heterodox' by later standards, neither mentions adoption, nor uses the terminology of sonship, and certainly does not speak of Jesus' elevation, nor of a connection between his virtuousness and the descending of Christ upon him. In Hippolytus' *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.33:1–2, a very similar account occurs, which is repeated in 10.21:1–3.[22] Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adversus omnes haereses* 3, also describes Cerinthus, emphasizing that he

taught that Christ is just a man born of the seed of Joseph; Ebion also appears in this context, but nothing is said about his Christology here.[23] Epiphanius, *Anacephalaiosis* 28.1:1–8, notes that Cerinthus 'also declares that Christ was born of Mary and the seed of Joseph' and that after Jesus, who was born of the seed of Joseph and Mary, had grown up.

> Christ, that is the Holy Spirit, descended upon him in the form of a dove in the river Jordan and that he to him and through him to them that were with them revealed the unknown Father. And therefore, since a power from above came upon him, he performed these mighty works. And while he himself suffered, that which came from above flew back again from Jesus on high. Jesus suffered and rose again, but Christ – that means he who descended upon him in the form of a dove – who came from above upon him flew away without suffering.[24]

Further restatements of Cerinthus' psilanthropism occur in 51.2:3; 51.3.2. Augustine, *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* 8, also gives his account of the views held on the part of the Cerinthians and Merinthians, noting that 'They say that Jesus was only a man and that he did not rise from the dead, but they expect the resurrection.'[25] The *Liber Praedestinatus* 1:8 notes that the Cerinthians believe that 'Jesus was only man.'[26] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* 2:3, also gives an account of the views of Cerinthus c.s.: 'Like the Hebrews he said that Jesus had been born in a natural way from a man and a woman, Joseph and Mary, but that he excelled in insight and righteousness and all other good things. Christ had descended upon him in the form of a dove. Next he preached the unknown God and performed well-known miracles. At the time of his suffering Christ left him and Jesus endured the passion.'[27] Also Pseudo-Hegemonius, *Acta archelai* 68 associates the denial of the 'godhead of Christ' and the acceptance of 'his humanity being from Mary' with Cerinthus (and Ebion and Photinus).[28] Isidorus of Seville, *De haeresibus liber* 9, states that, like the Carpocratians, the Cerinthians think that Christ 'was only man created from both sexes' and deny the resurrection.[29] John Damascene, *De haeresibus* 28, notes that the Cerinthians (or Merinthians) believed that 'Jesus was called Christ because of his progress in virtue.'[30] Something very similar is said by Theodor Bar-Khonai.[31] Also Paulus *De haeresibus libellus* 4 states that Cerinthus, like Ebion, believes that 'Christ was a man born of Mary.'[32]

Ebionites

Another early Jewish Christian group that is associated with adoptionist Christologies would be the (mysterious) Ebionites, who, according to Irenaeus, deny the parthenogenesis, or, more precisely: the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb by the Spirit, arguing instead that Jesus was begotten by Joseph (*Adversus Haereses* 3.21:1).[33] For Irenaeus, this means that the Ebionites do not believe in the union of God and man in Christ without which redemption cannot take place (cf. *Adversus Haereses* 4.33:4; 5.1:3). Tertullian refers in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 33:11 to the position of Ebion that Christ was not the Son of God, but he does not explain what this position entailed for him; he also mentions Ebion's rejection of Mary's virginity in *De virginibus velandis* 6:1. In *De carne Christi* 14, Tertullian again describes Ebion's view as denying that Jesus is divine and as teaching that he is a mere man and the son of David, not the son of God (see also 18).[34] Hippolytus in *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.34:1–2 also addresses the Ebionites identifying them somewhat fuller and stating that they believe in justification through observing the law that Jesus was justified in that way and hence was called Christ and that they can also become Christs by observing the law. In a similar way, this account occurs in

10.22:1.[35] Origen, *In Lucam homiliae* 17, affirms that the Ebionites taught that Christ had been born of a man and a woman,[36] which also applies to Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 1:26; Hilary also gives a more complex account of Ebion's Christology in the same work at 2:4, but does not refer to adoption in this context either (see further: 2:23 and 7:3.7). Origen, in *Commentarius in Matthaeum* XI.12, also makes a generic remark about Jewish believers who, he claims, both believe that Jesus is born of Mary and Joseph and of Mary and the Spirit only. In *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Romanos* III.11, he refers specifically to the belief of the Ebionites that Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph. He repeats the same in *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Titum*. The (christological) picture that Origen paints of the Ebionites becomes more complex in *Contra Celsum* V.66, where he refers to the circumstance that some Ebionites do and others do not believe in a virgin birth (but that Jesus was like other people). Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.27:1–6, describes the christological beliefs of the Ebionites as follows: '… they considered him a plain and common man who was justified only because of his progress in virtue, born of the intercourse of a man and Mary…there were others, however, besides them, that were of the same mind but avoided the strange absurdity of the former, and did not deny that the Lord was born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit. But nevertheless in as much as they also refused to confess that he was God, Word and Wisdom, they turned aside to the impiety of the former…'[37] The same author also discusses the linguistic background of the view of (some of) the Ebionites in as far as it concerns the virgin birth, noting in *Historia ecclesiastica* V.8:10, that they follow the translations of Theodotion and Aquila, rather than of the LXX, in as far as it concerns the 'virgin' in Isa. 7:14. A similar remark concerning Symmachus appears in *Historia ecclesiastica* V.17,[38] while Ambrosiaster, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Galatas, prologus* also refers to the 'Symmachiani' as 'declaring Christ to be not God and man but only man, in the way of Photinus.'[39] Epiphanius, *Anacephalaiosis*, tom. 2, mentions the Ebionites as well, noting that 'They say that Christ was created in heaven, and also the Holy Spirit. Christ dwelt in Adam at the beginning and in the course of time he withdrew from Adam and put him on again. They say that this brought him to perfection at his coming in the flesh…As I said, Christ put on a man at his coming in the flesh.'[40] Epiphanius returns to the Ebionites at (much) greater length in 30.1:1–33. Here, he gives multiple versions of the Christology/-ies of this group. Their starting point is the following teaching: 'First he stated that Christ was born of human intercourse and the seed of a man, Joseph.' (*Anacephalaiosis* 30.2:2) Subsequently, he gives the following outline:

> At first, this Ebion asserted, as I said, that Christ was from the seed of a man, Joseph. In the course of time and up to the present day, his followers started to think differently about Christ, since they directed their attention to chaotic and impossible things. I believe they soon got the same illusory ideas about Christ and the Holy Spirit as Elxaios, after the pseudo-prophet had joined them. I mentioned this man earlier in connection with the so-called Sampsaeans, Ossaeans and Elkesaites. For some of them say that Christ is also Adam, who was the first man created and into whom God's breath was blown. But others among them say that he is from above and was created before all things, that he is a spirit and stands above the angels and is Lord of all and that he is called Christ and has been chosen for all eternity. He comes into the world when he wishes for he came into Adam and appeared to the patriarchs clothed with a body. He is the same who went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who came at the end of the times and clothed himself with the body of Adam and who appeared to men, was crucified, raised and returned on high. Next, as they wish, they say: this is not true but the Spirit who is Christ came upon him and took the body of him who is called Jesus. For great is the darkness among them since they suppose him to be sometimes this way and then again that way.[41] (30.3:3–7)

Also a quotation from the Gospel of the Hebrews that the Ebionites are said to use is offered here, including a reference to the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit, but Epiphanius does not make any anti-adoptionist statements in this context and presumably did not consider it an offensive text (which would be striking indeed, given that it agrees largely with the Matthean account; see *Anacephalaiosis* 30.3:7–8). Only subsequently, the Ebionite interpretation of this passage is given: 'they insist that Jesus was really man. . .and that Christ came into being in him because he descended in the form of a dove. . .And Christ joined him and they like him to be Christ born from a man and a woman.'[42] (*Anacephalaiosis* 30:14.4) In the next sections, however (5–6), Epiphanius argues that the Ebionites also denied that Christ was a human being. A further version of Ebionite Christology appears in a discussion of Jesus and the devil, in which the following is said: 'they say. . ..that Jesus was born of the seed of a man and was chosen and that he therefore was called Son of God according to the election because Christ descended upon him from above in the form of a dove. They do not say that he was born of God the Father, but that he was created as one of the archangels (and even higher). . .'[43] (30.16:3–4) – even here, where it would have fitted perfectly, no mention is made of adoption. A further restatement of the psilanthropist beliefs of the Ebionites occurs in 30.17:1 (see also 51.2:3).[44] Yet another description occurs in 30.18:5: 'Christ they call the prophet of truth and 'Christ, the Son of God,' on account of his progress (in virtue) and the exaltation which descended upon him from above. They say that the prophets are prophets of reason and not of truth. They want him to be only a prophet and man and Son of God and Christ and mere man, as we said before, who attained by a virtuous life the right to be called Son of God.'[45] Ambrose, *De fide ad Gratianum* 5.8:105, treats the various titles used for Jesus as directed against a whole series of 'heretics,' starting with Ebion: 'For the Son of God is against Hebion [sic], the Son of David is against the Manichaeans, the Son of God is against Photinus, the Son of David is against Marcion, the Son of God against Paul of Samosata.'[46] Jerome, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Galatas* 1:1, also refers to both Ebion and Photinus as denying 'quod Dominus noster Jesus Christus, Deus sit.'[47] The same author offers an intriguing remark in *De viris illustribus* IX, noting that the Ebionites 'asserted that Christ did not exist before Mary.'[48] In *Commentarius In Matthaeum, praefatio*., the view of the Ebionites (and Cerinthus) is presented as denying that 'Christ came in the flesh.'[49] The Apostolic Constitutions (6.6:6), then, note that the Ebionites believe that 'the Son of God is a mere man; they generate him out of human lust and intercourse of Joseph and Mary.'[50] Filaster (*Diversarum Hereseon Liber* 37) equally thinks that the Ebionites 'supposed that our Saviour was a man born in a carnal way of Joseph, and he taught that nothing divine was in him, but he maintained that like all prophets also he had had the grace of God.'[51] Another account occurs in Cassianus *De incarnatione Christi contra Nestorium* 1:2, where a 'deficient' view of the incarnation on the part of Ebion is mentioned, but not spelled out, except for the fact that Ebion taught that Jesus Christ had been born as a mere man (see further: 3:5, and 5:10). Marius Victorinus (*In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas* 1:15) refers to the Symmachians who understand Jesus Christ to be 'Adam and a general soul.'[52] Pseudo-Ignatius, *Epistolam ad Philadelphianos* 6, notes that 'if somebody says that there is one God and also confesses Christ Jesus, but believes that the Lord was a mere man and not the only-begotten God, Wisdom and the Word of God, but believes that he is both soul and body, such a person is a serpent preaching deceit and error with a view to the perdition of the people. And such a person is poor of understanding, as Ebion is called.'[53] The sentiment that Ebion (and Cerinthus) denied that Christ existed before Mary is also shared by the Monarchian Prologues.[54] Marius Mercator, then, in his *Appendix ad*

contradictionem XII anathematismi Nestoriani 14–15, notes the following about Ebion and his teaching: 'he dared to preach that Christ was an ordinary human born of Joseph and Mary and that he excelled all the human race because of his meritorious life and that for this reason he had been adopted ("proque hoc in Dei Filium adoptatum") as the son of God.'[55] Augustine, *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* 10, notes that 'the Ebionites also say that Christ is only a man.'[56] Cassianus, *De incarnatione Christi contra Nestorium* 1:2, offers a version of the views of the Ebionites that is again accentuated differently: 'although he [Ebion] maintained the incarnation of the Lord, [he] stripped it of its connection with the divinity.'[57] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* 2:1, has the following, rather extensive account of Ebion's views: 'He said that there is one Unborn, similar to what we say, and he announces that he is the Creator of the world. But he said that the Lord Jesus Christ was born of Joseph and Mary, but as man excelled all others in virtue and purity.'[58] The *Liber Praedestinatus* 1:10 lists the Ebionites as its tenth heresy, stating that 'they maintain that the Lord Jesus Christ was only man.'[59] Timothy, Presbyter of Constantinople, also takes notice of the Ebionites in *De receptione haereticorum* 28 B/C: 'They have poor ideas about Christ. For they suppose him to be a mere man like others, justified by his progress in his way of life, and born of the intercourse of a man and Mary. And all heresies say this. Cerinthus and Carpocrates also say this and believe the same thing. Therefore they are called the "poor ones"....But they also say that this man became the Lord in appearance and that he was called the chosen one, named son of God according to election according to election (κατ' ἐκλογὴν, cf. Rom. 11:28) from on high when Christ came upon him in the form of a dove.'[60] Isidore of Seville, *De haeresibus liber* 11 notes that 'the Ebionites say that Christ is (only) man.'[61] A similar view is implied by the *Chronicon Paschale* 252 C/D.[62] John Damascene, *De haeresibus* 30, has the following to say about the Ebionites: 'They say that Christ was created in heaven as was also the Holy Spirit. Christ dwelt in Adam and in the course of time withdrew from Adam. They say that then he put him on again. This brought him to perfection when he came in the flesh.'[63] Theodor Bar-Khonai, *Liber scholiorum*, makes the following combination: 'This Ebion agrees more or less with the Carithians [Cerinthians] and the Nazoraeans. About Christ he said that he was created and he said the same concerning the Holy Spirit. Christ put on Adam at the beginning. When Adam sinned, he took him off. He returned and put him on at the end of time.'[64] Ebion also figures in the tenth century *Nestorian History*, where his doctrine is said to have been that he believed that 'l'humanité du Christ était dépouillée de sa divinité.'[65] Honorius Augustodunensis *De haeresibus libellus* 52 records that the Ebionites 'believe that Christ is only a perfect and righteous man.'[66] Rather extensively, Nicephorus Callistus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3:13, reports on the Ebionites, noting 'that they believed that Christ was only a mere man, justified according to his progress in his way of life. He came forth and was born of Mary and had his beginning in her marriage with Joseph...This heresy is split up into two parts: Those who say this and those who keep the idea that Christ was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, though they say he is not the pre-existent word and wisdom of God, without beginning.'[67]

Elchasai

A further, probably Jewish Christian thinker whose thoughts play a role in the discussion about adoptionism is Elchasai,[68] who appears in Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 9.13:1–17:2, and apparently also teaches that Christ is a 'normal' human being, albeit that he undergoes multiple virgin births, experiencing the human life cycle a number of times

(14:1–2). In 10.29:1–3, another account of Elchasai occurs; this time, however, it is said that Christ is a being from 'above,' i.e., in a variety of ways (by the Spirit, through parthenogenesis) infused into a number of bodies (as it was indicated in the previous account) and currently into the man Jesus.[69] Epiphanius, *Anacephalaiosis* 53.1:1–9, describes a further development of the Elchasite Christology, now consisting of the following: 'They confess Christ in name believing that he was created and that he appears time and again. He was formed for the first time in Adam and he puts off the body of Adam and assumes it again whenever he wished. He is called Christ and the Holy Spirit who is a female being, is his sister…'[70] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* 2:7, also describes the views of the Elchasaites: 'They agree with us about the beginning of all things. For they say that there is one Unborn and they call him the creator of all things. They say that Christ is not one, but was partly from above and partly from below. Earlier he had already lived in many persons and in the end he came down. Sometimes he says that Jesus is from God, then he calls him a Spirit and then again he says that he had a virgin as mother. In other books he does not say this. He says that he went from one body to another and that he went into other bodies and that he showed himself differently each time.'[71] The Elchasaites are sometimes associated with the Ebionites as far as their Christological views are concerned, e.g., by John Damascene *De haeresibus* 53.[72]

Nazoreans

A further group that is of relevance consists of the 'Nazoreans' that receive a relatively mild treatment by Epiphanius in his *Anacephalaios* 29.1:1–9, also discussing their christological views, but expressing uncertainty with regard to them in 29.7:6: 'With regard to Christ, I cannot say whether, misled by the wickedness of the aforesaid followers of Cerinthus and Merinthus, they believe that he is a mere man or whether, in agreement with the truth, they emphatically declare that he was born of the Holy Spirit from Mary.'[73] In *Epistola* 112:13, a passage of which it is not entirely clear whether he is still referring to the Ebionites by a different name, Jerome notes about the beliefs of the Nazoreans, 'They believe in Christ, the Son of God born of Mary the virgin, and they say about him that he suffered and rose again under Pontius Pilate, in whom also we believe.'[74] The same author, *Commentariorum in Esaiam* 29:17–21, seems to note that the Nazoraeans are very cautious in order to avoid denying that Christ was the Son of God.[75] According to Augustine, *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum* 9, 'the Nazoraeans confess that the Son of God is Christ.'[76] The *Liber Praedestinatus* notes something similar, 'they confess the Son of God.'[77] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* 2:2, notes that the Nazoraeans 'honour Christ as a righteous man.'[78] Then again, Isidorus of Seville, *De haeresibus liber* 10, states that 'the Nazoraeans say that Christ is God.'[79] John Damascene, *De haeresibus* 29, takes a similar view. Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio In Matthaeo* 2:2, notes that the Nazoraeans believe in Christ, but keep the law (as all other authors also state).[80] This view is shared by Honorius, Augustodunensis *De haeresibus libellus* 24,[81] and Paulus, *De haeresibus libellus* 5.[82]

Marcion and the Valentinians

While certainly not a Jewish Christian, also Marcion needs to be mentioned here, given that his christological views are sometimes described in a way that could make them sound adoptionistic. For example, Marcion denied that Christ had come in the flesh, at

least according to Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 33:11. According to Origen, *In Lucam homiliae* 17, Marcion taught that Christ had not been born of a woman at all. Then again, Pseudo-Augustinus, *sermones* 169 names Marcion together with Cerinthus, Ebion, and other 'antichrists' that deny that 'Christ existed before Mary.'[83] Alexander Minorita *Expositio in Apocalypsim* 2.2:2 also has Marcion, Ebion, and Cerinthus share the same view, c.q. that 'Christ is less than the Father.'[84]

The Valentinians are a final group that needs to be considered here, given that Origen, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Romanos* III.11, refers to their belief that Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph. He repeats the same in *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Titum*.[85]

Concluding observations on Jewish Christian groups

When reviewing the source material presented above, it seems to be a fair conclusion to say that adoptionism, as defined in the handbooks, does not occur in the accounts of these early Christian theologians (up to the middle ages!). Two partial exceptions related to Ebion do not weaken this conclusion. The first of these, which can be interpreted along adoptionist lines, but, notably, does not use a concept like υἱοθεσία, is the following description of the Ebionite beliefs in Epiphanius, *Anacephalaios* 30.18:5:

> Christ they call the prophet of truth and 'Christ, the Son of God' on account of his progress (in virtue) and the exaltation which descended upon him from above. They say that the prophets are prophets of reason and not of truth. They want him to be only a prophet and man and Son of God and Christ and mere man, as we said before, who attained by a virtuous life the right to be called Son of God.[86]

Even though this could be described as adoption if one would like to, the text itself does not use the concept. Also, when the same author discusses the Ebionite views of the baptism of Jesus, not the term adoption but that of election (κατὰ ἐκλογὴν) is used, and it is said that Christ descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove (*Anacephalaios* 30.16:3–4). The second exception is simultaneously the only text that does refer to adoption explicitly when it comes to the Ebionites is the fifth century (!) author Marius Mercator that was quoted above already. He indeed refers to Ebion as daring to teach that Christ was an ordinary human born of Joseph and Mary and that he excelled all the human race because of his meritorious life and that for this reason he had been adopted (proque hoc in Dei Filium adoptatum) as the son of God."[87] Still, this late testimony, stemming from the Nestorian controversies, hardly constitutes sufficient evidence to conclude that the Ebionites were indeed 'adoptionists.' In fact, the circumstance that Marius Mercator's text is the only clear reference to adoptionism in relation to Ebionites shows how slim the basis for a case for early Jewish Christian adoptionism actually is. Neither the Ebionites,[88] therefore, nor any of the other authors considered in this section can be classed as 'adoptionists' in the sense that the various handbooks on early Christianity tend to do.

Theodotus of Byzantium

One of the first early Christian thinkers that is associated with 'adoptionism' is Theodotus of Byzantium or Theodotus the Shoemaker.[89] His work does not survive, except to the extent that Epiphanius of Salamis (310/20 – 403) quotes from it. Other authors that discuss him and his views are Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339), Pseudo-Tertullian (mid-third century?), and Hippolytus of Rome (170–235). I will review the pertinent statements

made by these authors and then proceed to an evaluation of Theodotus of Byzantium's 'adoptionism.'

Eusebius discusses Theodotus extensively in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (V,28).[90] He places him in the time of bishop Victor of Rome (c. 189–199) and associates him with the teaching that Christ was a 'mere man' (*psilos anthropos*–psilanthropism, see *Historia Ecclesiastica* V,28,2), a doctrine that he claims Paul of Samosata attempts to revive in his own days. Specifically, Eusebius states that Victor 'cut off from communion Theodotus, the cobbler, the leader and father of this God-denying apostasy, and the first to declare that Christ is mere man. ' (V,28,6) Eusebius, in his discussion of Theodotus, does not elaborate further on the precise extent of his teaching concerning Christ. The term 'adoption' or a concept close to it is not mentioned.

Hippolytus of Rome discusses Theodotus in his *Refutatio omnium haeresium* and notes that he had borrowed his teachings from Cerinthus and Ebion (VII,35,1–36,1 and X,23–24).[91] As far as Hippolytus is concerned, Theodotus taught that Jesus had been born as a human being, albeit from the virgin who had been overshadowed by the Spirit according to the will of God and that he had received the Christ at his baptism in the Jordan. This leads to the following position on the part of Theodotus, at least according to Hippolytus: 'that Jesus was a (mere) man, born of a virgin, according to the counsel of the Father, and that after he had lived promiscuously with all men, and had become pre-eminently religious, he subsequently at his baptism in Jordan received Christ, who came from above and descended (upon him) in form of a dove.' (VII,35,2; trans.: ANF) Furthermore, he retains that among the followers of Theodotus, there were some that would opine 'that never was this man made God, (even) at the descent of the Spirit; whereas others (maintain that he was made God) after the resurrection from the dead.' (VII,35,2; trans.: ANF).[92] A little further on in his work, Hippolytus again addresses Theotodus of Byzantium's teaching, i.e., that 'Theodotus affirms that Christ is a man of a kindred nature with all men, but that He surpasses them in this respect, that, according to the counsel of God, He had been born of a virgin, and the Holy Ghost had overshadowed His mother. This heretic, however, maintained that Jesus had not assumed flesh in the womb of the Virgin, but that afterwards Christ descended upon Jesus at His baptism in form of a dove.' (X,23; Trans.: ANF). Thus, as far as the teaching of Theodotus himself is concerned, the question seems to be one of the descent and indwelling of Christ in a human being, not of the adoption of a human being to become Son of God. This is also not directly implied by the two views held by followers of Theodotus as reported by Hippolytus; there, the point is the *theosis* of Jesus, not his sonship or the sonship of Christ.

When turning to Pseudo-Tertullian, in his *Adversus omnes haereses* (VIII,2–3),[93] the following may be observed with regard to his account of the doctrinal position of Theodotus. He is very brief: 'he introduced a doctrine by which to affirm that Christ was merely a human being, but deny His deity; teaching that He was born of the Holy Spirit indeed of a virgin, but was a solitary and bare human being, with no pre-eminence above the rest (of mankind), but only that of righteousness.' (Trans.: ANF) Little is said about adoption here, only a combination of pneumatologically effectuated parthogenesis resulting in the birth of a human being.

Finally, Epiphanius of Salamis may be addressed here, who mentions Theodotus in section 34 of his *Panarion*.[94] Of all the authors concerned with Theodotus, he provides the most extensive account and he probably had access to a digest containing the arguments of Theodotus.[95] Epiphanius' point of departure is that Theodotus began arguing that Christ is not divine because he wished to avoid the accusation of having

blasphemed by having denied Christ during a persecution (1,6). Well in line with this starting point, all the examples of Scriptural proof of Theodotus that Epiphanius quotes and refutes have to do with precisely this point: that Christ is a human being, not divine. Adoption does not play a role in this context at all.

When considering these various witnesses, it will become clear that there is little reason to call Theodotus of Byzantium an adoptionist.[96] In fact, the concept of adoption hardly occurs in his work. The only text that comes close to what could be 'classical adoptionism' would be Hippolytus of Rome's description of Theodotus' interpretation of Christ's baptism in the Jordan. There, however, it is not so much Christ's pre-existence that is being described, but rather the beginning of the divine indwelling of Christ in Jesus. The notion of Jesus' *adoption* as Son of God is entirely absent from any description of Theodotus' own teaching.

Pastor Hermas

The *Pastor Hermas* (mid-second century) is another text that is often associated with the notion of early Christian adoptionism.[97] Specifically, the fifth similitude would give rise to such an interpretation. Here, the visionary receives the following teaching:

> God made the Holy Spirit dwell in the flesh that he desired, even though it preexisted and created all things. This flesh, then, in which the Holy Spirit dwelled, served well as the Spirit's slave, for it conducted itself in reverence and purity, not defiling the Spirit at all. Since it lived in a good and pure way, cooperating with the Spirit and working with it in everything it did, behaving in a strong and manly way, God chose it to be a partner with the Holy Spirit. For the conduct of this flesh was pleasing, because it was not defiled on earth while bearing the Holy Spirit. Thus he took his Son and the glorious angels as counselors, so that this flesh, which served blamelessly as the Spirit's slave, might have a place of residence and not appear to have lost the reward for serving as a slave. For all flesh in which the Holy Spirit has dwelled – and which has been found undefiled and spotless – will receive a reward.

While this might easily be taken for an adoptionist text, interpreting the 'flesh' in which the Holy Spirit dwells as Jesus or Christ, this would not only sit uneasily with what appears to be the relatively high Christology of the *Pastor Hermas* in other parts of the work, but it would also seem to provide an odd fit with what follows: an exhortation to live in accordance with the Spirit, while it also sits uneasily with the role of 'the Son' as a counselor. Even if the scene would indicate some kind of exaltation of an earthly Spirit-indwelled Christ, the text does not refer to adoption as Son – in fact, Christ is referred to as 'Son' throughout the *Pastor Hermas* already.[98] It is probably best to view Hermas, *Sim*. 5, as a soteriologically oriented text that is not primarily concerned with saying something about the being of Christ.

Excerpta de Theodoto – *Clement of Alexandria*

Finally, a body of texts that is also ascribed to a further (but otherwise unknown) Theodotus should be considered.[99] His work is only partially preserved in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, but the excerpts that survive may still be sufficient to get an impression of the kind of 'adoptionism' that this Theodotus promoted, even if it is at times difficult to see what Clement attributes to Theodotus directly and what he attributes to other 'Valentinians'. A first significant excerpt is 26:

> The visible part of Jesus was Wisdom and the Church of the superior seeds and he put it on through the flesh, as Theodotus says; but the invisible part is the Name, which is the Only- Begotten Son. Thus when he says 'I am the door,' he means that you, who are of the superior seed, shall come up to the boundary where I am. And when he enters in, the seed also enters with him into the Pleroma, brought together and brought in through the door.[100]

Jesus appears here as a composite being, one part earthly, i.e., Sophia, the other part heavenly, i.e., the Name, the only-begotten Son. The origins of the Name/the only-begotten Son are heavenly, as it is described in excerpts 32–33:

> Though there is unity in the Pleroma, each of the Aeons has its own complement, the syzygia. Therefore, whatever come out of a syzygia are complete in themselves (pleromas) and whatever come out of one are images. So Theodotus called the Christ who came out of the thought of Wisdom, an 'image of the Pleroma.' Now he abandoned his mother and ascending into the Pleroma was mixed as if with the whole and thus also with the Paraclete. Indeed Christ became an adopted son as he became 'elect' among the completed beings and 'First-Born' of things there.[101]

Thus, the Name/the only-begotten Son, originally an image, descends to earthly spheres, uniting himself, through baptism, with Sophia and then returns to the Pleroma, in fact now ascending to a higher status, being adopted into the Pleroma, while having adopted the redeemed through his baptism (see also excerpts 67–68). The adoptionism that is at work here is a very complex one and, even though both the redeemed are adopted by Christ and Christ is adopted into a higher level of being following his redemptive activities, it all remains a far cry from what is commonly identified as adoptionism.

Irenaeus of Lyons

A further text that may be considered is Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* III.19.1.[102] Here, Irenaeus states that the Word of God became flesh, c.q. that the Son of God became Son of Man, in order that 'man' (i.e., a human being, specifically the one that the Son of God became and that represents the human race) might, through the agency of the Word of God, be adopted as a son of God. While this could be constructed as adoptionism on the part of Irenaeus, it seems that Orbe's case that this does not touch the 'nature' of Christ/the Son of God and is mainly related to the incarnate Word's establishment of a pattern of salvation that can be followed by other members of the human race is still convincing (see also *Adversus Haereses* III.17.1).[103]

Paul of Samosata, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Artemas: adoptionist heresesiarchs? The interpretation of the sources

In a widely read and highly influential study of the 'Orthodox corruption' of Scripture, Bart Ehrman notes that he includes Paul of Samosata in his discussion of early Christian adoptionism, 'not because he [Paul of Samosata] was actually an adoptionist, but because the Council of Antioch in 268 C.E. condemned him on these terms.'[104] While this statement already warns one against classing Paul of Samosata as an adoptionist, a review of the available evidence, taking into account that it stems from Paul's adversaries – of which there were many, and probably for a variety of reasons – ought to make one even more critical when it comes to evaluating to what extent Paul's views are indeed reflected

truthfully in these (hostile) sources.[105] What, then, is there in terms of descriptions of Paul of Samosata's Christology?

To begin with, there is the letter of the Synod of Antioch, which, in 268, condemned Paul. The part that contains a description of Paul's teaching is quoted by Eusebius in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.30:1011: 'For he is not willing to acknowledge with us that the Son of God has come down from heaven (to anticipate something of what we are about to write); and this will not be merely asserted, but is proved from many passages of the notes that we send, and not least where he says that Jesus Christ is from below.'[106] Unfortunately, the 'notes' that are referred to here have not been preserved. Two statements remain, therefore, i.e., the negative statement that Paul was not ready to acknowledge that the Son of God had come down from heaven and the positive statement that he did say that Jesus Christ was from below (κάτωθεν). Accordingly, Paul is deposed by the synod and replaced by Domnus, while it is suggested that Paul should seek communion with Artemas, given that he holds similar views. Somewhat earlier, in his introduction of the matter, Eusebius has also presented his own view of the matter, noting that Paul held the view that Christ was 'in nature' a common man (ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος). If one is to attempt to unpack this further, the only other place to look is, in light of the highly questionable nature of other (and later) sources, a discussion of the expression ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical Theology*, where, in 1.20:43–45, he states what he thinks that this means, i.e., that Jesus Christ was a human being with body and soul, in which, specifically, the logos did not replace the soul.[107] However, Eusebius does not develop this understanding of 'ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος' in relation to Paul of Samosata primarily, but rather in relation to Marcellus of Ancyra, whom he accuses of having held this position, just as the Ebionites and Paul did. With this, one has only reviewed the reliable evidence regarding Paul of Samosata's actual Christology, which, as Norris puts it, can be summed up as follows: 'that it was a Christology which said Jesus Christ came from below, rejected the Son of God's pre-existence and descent from heaven, and emphasized the ordinary manhood of body and soul.'[108] What this precisely means is relatively unclear, certainly when it is compared with Marcellus of Ancyra (see below), who would probably be able to agree with all of this, but still teach the full divinity, eternal character, and pre-existence of the logos, the virgin birth, and the full incarnation of the logos, etc., but only with a view of the union between logos and human (Jesus through Mary) that others thought to be deficient, leaving the Son of God a 'mere human.' Not all 'psilanthropisms' are the same, therefore. In any case, the various surviving descriptions of his teaching give little reason to characterize Paul of Samosata as an adoptionist.[109]

The considerations about Paul of Samosata also show something else: whenever someone is accused of teaching that Jesus Christ is a 'mere human being', this statement is made in a particular context, which should be taken into account when evaluating what is meant when someone is accused of being a 'psilanthropist': depending on the accuser's own christological preferences, this might widely differ. However, more has happened to Paul of Samosata as well: he has been made part of a tradition of heresiarchs, including the Ebionites (the evidence about whom was reviewed above), Marcellus of Ancyra and Artemas. The evidence regarding their views, often also identified as adoptionist, needs to be reviewed here as well. That there is reason to do so is evidenced by the work of, e.g., Ehrman, who within the scope of a few pages in his work on the 'orthodox corruption of Scripture' can both give a brief outline of the position of Artemas as a further and intellectually more reflected version of the teaching of Theodotus of Byzantium, subsequently state that we hardly know anything about it, and finally discuss him as an adoptionist.[110] Again, Eusebius is an important source:

> In a treatise worked out by one of these against the heresy of Artemon, which Paul of Samosata has tried to renew in our time, there is extant an account which bears on the history we are examining. For he criticizes the above-mentioned heresy (which claims that the Saviour was a mere man) as a recent innovation, because those who introduced it wished to make it respectable as being ancient. Among many other points adduced in refutation of their blasphemous falsehood, the treatise relates this: "For they say that all who went before and the apostles themselves received and taught what they now say, and that the truth of the teaching was preserved until the times of Victor, who was the thirteenth bishop in Rome after Peter, but that the truth has been corrupted from the time of his successor, Zephyrinus. What they said might perhaps be plausible if in the first place the divine Scriptures were not opposed to them, and there are also writings of certain Christians, older than the time of Victor, which they wrote to the Gentiles on behalf of the truth and against the heresies of their own time. I mean the work of Justin and Miltiades and Tatian and Clement and many others in all of which Christ is treated as God. For who is ignorant of the books of Irenaeus and Melito and the others who announced Christ as God and man? And all the Psalms and hymns which were written by faithful Christians from the beginning sing of the Christ as the Logos of God an treat him as God. How then is it possible that after the mind of the church had been announced for so many years that the generation before Victor can have preached as they say? Why are they not ashamed of so calumniating Victor when they know quite well that Victor excommunicated Theodotus the cobbler, the founder and father of this insurrection which denies God, when he first said that Christ was a mere man? For if Victor was so minded towards them as their blasphemy teaches, how could he have thrown out Theodotus who invented this heresy?[111]

Again, three things are the case: first, Artemas is accused of teaching that the savior was a 'mere man' (and it is noted that Paul of Samosata revived this teaching); second, Artemas is made part of a tradition of people that have taught this; third, from the point of view of Eusebius, all the members of this tradition of heresiarchs taught the same error: Christ is not God, but a mere man. What this means for Eusebius is, at least in one case, clear and was discussed above. What might also be clear is that according to this source, the only one extant, Artemas had little to say on the subject of adoption. A rather vague reference to the teaching of Artemas by Methodius, *Symposium* viii.10, exists, noting that he taught that Christ 'only came into being in appearance,'[112] and adds little to the further definition of the Christology of Artemas.

When turning to the evidence concerning Marcellus of Ancyra, the following may be observed, in as far as he is accused of a 'psilanthropist' Christology. First, a review of the (extant) fragments of his work indicates that he nowhere uses the concept of 'adoption.' Also, in most recent scholarly studies of his work, the notion of adoptionism is not applied to him.[113] What seems to be the case, however, is that Marcellus, in a certain way, did teach that the Son of God was, at some point, not. This has to do with his heavy emphasis on the eternal character of the Word that was in God from the beginning in analogy to the way in which a soul is in a human being (Marcellus knows no eternal generation of the Word).[114] Even though Marcellus can also place emphasis on the notion that the Son of God is, in a way, also eternal, because his coming into being was determined in God's eternal counsel,[115] he also teaches quite clearly that the Son of God, with which he only designates the incarnate Word, i.e., Jesus Christ,[116] was born from a virgin, as, e.g., fragment 11 clearly shows.[117] This position, clearly, made him vulnerable vis-à-vis- those that taught the eternity of the Son and equated the eternal Word and the eternal Son to a larger extent. It does not, however, make Marcellus of Ancyra an adoptionist in any meaningful sense of the word. Another issue that is apparent from Eusebius' comments on Marcellus' views that were already referred to above, in relation to an exegesis of the former's expression ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος, i.e., Marcellus' view that the logos did not replace

the human soul in the person Christ (an impossibility, given that for him the eternal logos is the soul of God), leads to a position that could be construed as 'semi-modalist.'[118] That is to say, a position that expressed the view that the eternal Word is not a separate hypostasis and, therefore, can (only) be said to be present as one mode of God's presence. Furthermore, this position entailed because of the analogy of the (human) soul body – logos-God and the unity of the latter two (and the former two), the view that the indwelling eternal Word cannot be understood as taking the place of the human soul in Jesus Christ, thus giving the impression that Jesus Christ remains a 'mere human being.'[119] This, to be sure, is quite in line with Marcellus' understanding of the role of incarnation, which had much more to do with making the invisible visible (i.e., the divine logos through the medium of the human flesh) than with creating a communion of divine Word and human body in one person. Whatever classification one might wish to use for this, 'adoptionism,' as defined above, is probably not a good match. The issues that Eusebius and others had with Marcellus had to do, amongst others, with the kind of eternity attributed to the Word and with the precise composition of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in terms of body and soul(s).

Conclusions

These considerations lead to the following conclusions – and consequences – for the way in which the concept of 'adoptionism' is used in the study of early Christianity and how it could be used responsibly.

First, the term 'adoptionism' should be reconsidered. It has removed itself quite substantially from its origins, i.e., its use by Strauss and Weiss, and is used to refer to something that, at least in the history of the (post/extra-New Testament) early Church, is hard to find in the sources (with the possible exception of some New Testament texts). In none of the authors and groups considered above can the kind of adoptionism that should have been there be found in a convincing way. Therefore, the term should be abolished as a description of early Christian theologies and groups. Its continued use would help to perpetuate a paradigm for the development of early Christian Christology that is simply not viable. If it is to be used at all, the term could be used for later, i.e., early medieval adoptionists and maybe for New Testament texts,[120] but not for the description of pre-Nicene christologies seen through the lens of Nicene and Chalcedonian concerns. Thus, the misguided reception of Strauss and Weiss, as it was referred to above, should be made undone.

Second, the study of early Christian 'adoptionists' shows that their concerns are quite different from those that have been attributed to them from a post-Nicene perspective, i.e., they are not so much concerned with questions of the consubstantiality of Son and Father or the pre-existence of the Son, but rather with questions concerning the indwelling of the divine (Christ) in the human or with questions of soteriology. Whenever 'adoptionist' remarks occur, they have more to do with the unity of a divine being with a human person than with the promotion of a particularly deserving human being to a divine status. It might be more appropriate to speak of attempts to conceptualize the 'incarnation' of the divine in the human rather than vice versa. Even more different than this is the promotion of a being from one place in the πλήρωμα to another, higher place through adoption as it occurs in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*. Studying these texts for their own merits helps to appreciate them afresh and further dismantle the 'adoptionist paradigm.' Of course, open questions remain such as what the merits would be of a Christology that does not use the concept of 'in utero' incarnation as a starting point. However, both that question and other questions would

have to be answered without recourse to a tradition of 'adoptionist' Christologies in the early Church. The study of 'psilanthropists' such as Artemas, Paul of Samosata, and Marcellus of Ancyra should also be continued along these lines, i.e., with an eye to what they in fact were saying and without taking (Eusebian and other) genealogies of heresiarchs for granted that trace Marcellus back to the Ebionites and the Theodoti by way of Paul of Samosata and Artemas and thus associate him with 'adoptionists.' Again, also the 'psilanthropists' were probably more interested in ways of conceptualizing the incarnation than in the *theosis* of Jesus of Nazareth in terms of his adoption as Son of God. The framework of 'proto-orthodoxy' (with at its background 'orthodoxy') to describe how these various christological models differed from later 'orthodoxy' is heuristically unhelpful and hermeneutically inappropriate, given that it leads to reading them in relation to a (much) later historical phenomenon, i.e., Nicean and Chalcedonian christologies, which is anachronistic to say the least. This way of proceeding also draws the attention more to what 'adoptionist' christologies do not say, or what they seem to be pitched against (but cannot be pitched against, given that the 'orthodoxy' against which they are made to protest was not around yet), rather than to what they intend to say on their own, without reference to any (later) orthodoxy. The term 'proto-orthodoxy' does a disservice to historical inquiry.

Postscript: New Testament texts and adoptionism, historiographical and hermeneutical considerations

Having considered the evidence for adoptionism according to its classical definition in the patristic period up to the fourth century (including later witnesses to authors from that era) and having found none, it also becomes inviting to reconsider the New Testament texts that have often been read in connection with this, presumed, early Christian christological position. A number of New Testament texts, namely, are often interpreted with reference to early (Jewish) Christian adoptionism; this concerns specifically Rom. 1:3–4, Acts 2:36 (and 13:32), as well as the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and the transfiguration. While much can be said exegetically about any of these texts – and certainly is being said – the above discussion may have complicated things somewhat hermeneutically. This is to say two things: (a) the observation that there is no such thing as an 'adoptionist' tradition in early Christianity makes it impossible, or at least very hard, to present New Testament texts as part of such a tradition or to interpret them with reference to them; (b) the various ways of thinking about the relationship between God (the Father), the divine logos, Jesus' birth, the titles Christ and Son of God, make matters more complicated. Reading the New Testament through the lens of Marcellus of Ancyra, e.g., would make a combination of the virgin birth and the proclamation of Jesus as Son of God only during his earthly life perfectly understandable, e.g., without needing any reference to adoption. Against this background, I would suggest that the task ahead for the exegesis of the relevant New Testament texts is to return to the initial concern of Strauss and to consider what it means for the understanding of Jesus that his messianic character is expressed in terminology deriving from Old Testament theocratic (and messianic) traditions and to explore this further, rather than to place them in either the nonexistent tradition of adoptionism, or to present them to (equally hard to find) proto-orthodoxy (which only exists as a historiographical construct, when reading the history of the early church through the lens of the conciliar tradition).

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Notes

1. Also a term that suggests that has as its point of departure the equality of father and son, it seems.
2. Ehrman, *Corruption*, 14 (see also 47–54), see also idem, *New Testament*, 3.6.418.431.446. See for a description from the German-speaking (and roman catholic) realm, identifying adoptionist christology as the earliest kind of Christology, e.g., Grillmeier, *Christ*, 9–11.
3. Ritter, "Trinität I," 91–92: 'eine christologische Konzeption, die jede Präexistenz Christi leugnete und annahm, der Mensch Jesus sei von Gott (etwa in der Jordantaufe) zum Sohn adoptiert worden.'
4. See also the cautious contribution by Löhr, "Adoptianismus," 124, who rightly notes that from the fourth century onwards a heresiological cliché of adoptionism emerged; this study will move beyond Löhr's caution.
5. This term has been popularized by Bart Ehrman, who takes his historiographical cue from Walter Bauer's work (see Ehrman, *Corruption*, 7–8).
6. In this article, I will not address a related question, i.e., what 'adoption' actually would have meant in a first-century setting, especially considering questions of Greco-Roman legal conventions surrounding adoption. I have done so earlier, drawing attention to the fact that 'adoption' carried a much more realistic connotation in the Greco-Roman world than it – often – does in modern scholarship and society. This also changes the shape of the debate about supposed early Christian 'adoptionism' somewhat, especially, however, as far as the New Testament is concerned, which falls outside of the scope of the present article. See: Smit, "Adoption."
7. It is readily conceded that texts such as Acts 2:36, Mark 1:9-11parr., and Rom. 1:3–4 are open to an interpretation that would have these texts state that Christ was adopted into divine sonship; still, this does not answer the question what such adoption meant precisely and it certainly does not mean that these texts ought to be read as addressing the issues raised in later debates.
8. See: Eskola, *Messiah*, 295–321.
9. See on this subject also the counterproposal by Hurtado, *Lord*.
10. Eskola, *Messiah*, 295, mentions as classic examples Käsemann, "Kanon," esp. 215, and Dunn, *Unity*, 243.
11. Strauß, *Leben*, 478–480, Weiss, *Urchristentum*, 85–86.
12. Johannes Weiss, 118–119, for the German original, see: Weiss, *Urchristentum*, 85: 'Es ist dies die älteste Lehre über Christus, die wir haben, daher von hohem Interesse, umso mehr als sie später von andern weitergehenden Lehren verdrängt worden ist. Man nennt sie die adoptianistische, weil hier nämlich ein Akt der Adoption angenommen wird (υἱοθεσία); Adoption ist hier gebraucht im Gegensatz zu der natürlichen Sohnschaft, die von Geburt an vorhanden ist. Es liegt also hier der Gedanke vor, daß Jesus nicht von Anfang an Messias, oder, wie dafür auch gesagt werden kann, Sohn Gottes war, sondern, daß er es erst geworden ist in einem bestimmten scharf abgegrenzten Willensakt Gottes.'
13. See for the further development of his view: Weiss, *Urchristentum*, 86–93.
14. Bousset, *Kyrios*, 324–326.
15. See, e.g., Von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, 134–135.
16. See Bousset, *Kyrios*, 327.
17. See, e.g., Eskola, *Messiah*, 307–308.
18. See on the problems involved with regard to the study (and existence) of the Ebionites, e.g., Eskola, *Messiah*, 299–309 and Luomanen, "Ebionites."
19. This is also of importance because it is this witness that provided the basis for the development of the notion of adoptionism as an early Jewish Christian phenomenon.
20. See esp. Cavadini, *Christology*, 1: '"Adoptionism" is a word without a fixed historical reference, as there have been several theologies, historically unrelated, which have been given this name. It is associated with a variety of second- and third-century figures including

Theodotus, the leather merchant, and Paul of Samosata, with certain currents in Arian theology, with twelfth-century figures such as Abelard and Gilbert de la Porrée, and more loosely with such fifth-century Antiochene theologians as Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius. The word (sometimes spelled "adoptianism") is also used to refer to the group of late eighth-century Hispanic theologians who, along with their opponents both Hispanic and Carolingian, will be the subject of this study.'

21. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 103–105. For Cerinthus' (alleged) proximity to adoptionists, see, e.g., Ehrman, *Corruption*, 119.
22. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 111–113.121.
23. See Ibid., 123–125.
24. Ibid., 163.
25. Ibid., 239.
26. Ibid., 243.
27. Ibid., 249. See also the same author, *o.c.*, 5:11.
28. Ibid., 251. – A very similar statement is made by Cassiodorus, *Historia ecclesiastica tripartita* 9.16:5: 'We anathemize Photinus who renewing the heresy of Ebion, asserted that our Lord Jesus Christ was from Mary only.' (Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 257). On Photinus, see also Isidorus of Seville, *Etymologiae* 8.6:38, associating him with Ebion. The same association is made by Paulus, *de haer. libell*. 35, noting that the Photinians revived the heresy of the Ebionites and 'declared that Christ has been conceived by Mary through Joseph in matrimonial intercourse.' (Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 275).
29. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 261.
30. Ibid., 265.
31. See Ibid., 267.
32. Ibid., 275.
33. For this and the following, see Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 105–107.
34. For Tertullian's remarks, see: Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 109–111.
35. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 113.122.
36. See Ibid., 127.
37. Ibid., 141.
38. See Ibid., 147.
39. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 197–199; on the identity of 'Ambrosiaster,' see: Krans, "Who."
40. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 161.
41. Ibid., 177–179.
42. Ibid., 181.
43. See Ibid., 183.
44. See Ibid., 185.
45. Ibid., 187–189.
46. Ibid., 199.
47. Ibid., 205. See, there, also the quotation from *Commentarius in epistolam ad Galatas* 1:11–12; 3:13–14, as well as on 207, the quotation from *Commentarius in epistolam ad Ephesios* 4:10. A much vaguer reference to the Ebionites ('who believe in Christ') occurs in *De situ et nominibus locorum Hebraicorum liber* 112. – For a virtual restatement of the view quoted in the main text above, see: Theodoret of Cyrus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.11:3.
48. I find this intriguing because of the proximity of this description to what can be said about Marcellus of Ancyra's Christology, on which, see below. – This accusation is virtually literally repeated with regard to Cerinthus, Ebion, Artemas and Photinus by Gennadius Massiliensis, *De Ecclesiasticis Dogmatibus* 22 (see Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 253).
49. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 215.
50. Ibid., 229.
51. Ibid., 231–233.
52. See Ibid., 233.
53. Ibid., 235.
54. Ibid., 235.
55. Ibid., 245. See also the same work at 36. See further also: Isidorus of Seville, *De haeresibus liber* 8; notably, here a link with not only the Ebionites, but also with the Theodotians is made.

56. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 239. In the same work, at 32, the Elkasaites and the Sampseans are also associated with this view.
57. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 241. The popularity of this view in a large Belgian city in Cassianus' time is also mentioned here. See also 3:5 and 5:10.
58. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 247.
59. Ibid., 243.
60. Ibid., 257.
61. Ibid., 261. See from the same author also *Etymologiae* 8.6:37 (Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 263).
62. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 263.
63. Ibid., 265. The text is largely the same as the one offered by Epiphanius, *Anacephalaiosis*, tom. 2, as published by the same, 161.
64. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 267, referring to p. 301 of this work.
65. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 271, referring to p. 191 of this work.
66. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 273.
67. Ibid., 277, see also: 5:12 (Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 279).
68. S., e.g., Frank, *Lehrbuch*, 146: 'offensichlicht. . .adoptianistisch.'
69. See Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 115–121.
70. Ibid., 197. – See also 69.2:3, where John is introduced as attempting to solve with his gospel the errors of Ebionites, Cerinthians and Merinthians, and Nazoreans.
71. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 251.
72. See Ibid., 265.
73. Ibid., 173.
74. Ibid., 201.
75. Ibid., 223, see also from the same work: 31:6–9.
76. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 239.
77. Ibid., 243.
78. Ibid., 249.
79. Ibid., 261. See also from the same author *Etymologiae* 8.6:9 (Klijn and Reinink, *o.c.*, 261).
80. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence, 269*.
81. Ibid., 273.
82. Ibid., 275.
83. Ibid., 275.
84. Ibid., 277.
85. See: Ibid., 133.
86. Ibid., 187–189.
87. Marius Mercator, *Appendix ad contradictionem XII anathematismi Nestoriani* 14–15, Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 245. See also the same work at 36. See further also: Isidorus of Seville, *De haeresibus liber* 8; notably, here a link with not only the Ebionites, but also with the Theodotians is made.
88. See the convincing discussion by Eskola, *Messiah*, 299–309.
89. See, e.g., Frank, *Lehrbuch*, 160.
90. See, e.g., Eusebius, *History* I, 517–519.
91. See: Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 318–321, 401–402.
92. The other Theodotus, i.e., Theodotus the Banker, a prominent follower of Theodotus the Byzantine, will not be discussed here, as he is mainly of interest with regard to his view of the relationship between Christ and Melchisedek, not with regard to his view of the relationship between Jesus, Christ, and the Father. According to Hippolyt, however, he was in agreement with Theodotus of Byzantium as far as the descent of Christ upon Jesus is concerned (X,24) – See also Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adversus omnes haereses*, VIII,3.
93. See for the text the edition by E. Kroymann, *CCSL* 2, 1399–1410, 1410.
94. See for the text the edition by Holl and Dummer, *Epiphanius*, 317–337. See for an English translation, e.g., Williams, *Panarion*.
95. See Williams, *Panarion*, 72; for his rendering of Epiphanius' presentation of the position of Theodotus of Byzantium, see idem, *o.c.*, 72–77.
96. See also the conclusions of Löhr, "Theodotus," and the view of Markschies, *Trinità*, 105–106.

97. For the text and translation, see: Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers* II, 334–337. See for the following interpretation also Hurtado, *Lord*, 602–605. See further also Osiek, *Shepherd*, 179–181.
98. See for this line of thought Hurtado, *Lord*, 602–606; Osiek, *Shepherd*, 179–181.
99. See in general: Thomassen, *Seed*, esp. 28–38.
100. Trans.: Casey, *Excerpta, ad loc*.
101. Trans.: Casey, *Excerpta, ad loc*.
102. See for an outline of this case: Orbe, "¿San Ireneo."
103. See Orbe, "¿San Ireneo," *passim*, see also Behr, *Ascetism*, 60–61, Briggman, *Irenaeus*, 74–75.
104. Ehrman, *Corruption*, 52. See for Paul of Samosata as an adoptionist, e.g., Quasten, *Patrology*, 143.
105. See Norris, "Paul of Samosata," 59–70. See for a renewed consideration of the conflict as a largely theological one: De Navascués, *Pablo de Samosata*.
106. Eusebius, *History* II, 220–221.
107. See Norris, "Paul of Samosata," 55.
108. Ibid., 58.
109. See on this, also Hanns Christoph Brennecke, "Prozess," and Daley, "'One thing'," 29–32, both noting that the remaining sources do not point the way to an adoptionist Christology clearly.
110. See, e.g., Ehrman, *Corruption*, 49.52.
111. Eusebius, *History* I, 517–519.
112. Klijn and Reinink, *Evidence*, 137.
113. For an edition of the fragments of his works, see Vinzent, *Markell*, for an earlier edition; see Hansen and Klostermann, *Eusebius*. See further Parvis, *Marcellus*; Ayres, *Nicaea*; Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum*. On the problematic character of the appertaining post-Nicene sources and their view of earlier thinkers, see Ferguson, *Past*.
114. See Vinzent, *Markell*, xxix–xxxii.
115. Interestingly, Marcellus" exegesis of Rom. 1:4 serves to make this point – and not a "classical" adoptionist point. See fragment 37 (Vinzent).
116. See Vinzent, *Markell*, xxxiv–xxxv
117. See fragment 11 (Vinzent, Markell, 12–15), in Vinzent's translation: "der Logos, der dieses (sc. das Fleisch) durch die reine Jungfrau anzunehmen für wert hielt. . ." – See also Vinzent, *o.c*., xliii on Marcellus' christological position concerning the Son of God: "Der Logos (des) Gottes ist wahrhaft und eigentlich 'Logos' und zwar der einzige Logos. Dieser Name ist seine wahre und immer gültige Bezeichnung. Lediglich in Gottes Vorherbestimmung und in dem Gegründetsein vor dem neuen Äon heißt es vor der Inkarnation prophetisch auch 'Sohn'. Erst aufgrund der Gemeinschaft von Logos und Mensch/Fleisch ist er als 'wahrer Sohn' zu bezeichnen, dann nämlich, wenn der Logos nach der Annahme des Menschen bzw. des Fleisches tatsächlich auch Maria gezeugt wurde, also Sohn ist." See further: fragments 8, 11, 14, 16, 26, 28, 37 (including a notably non-adoptionist interpretation of Rom. 1:4), 48, 61, 75, 83, 85, 97, 99, 101, 111 (clearly non-adoptionistic), 112 (non-adoptionistic use of Rom. 1:4), 126 (rebuking Eusebius for his psilanthropism!); see also Marcellus' letter to Julius of Rome, in: Vinzent, *o.c*., 124–127.
118. See Ayres, *Nicaea*, 77.
119. See also Vinzent, *Markell*, lvi; Ayres, *Nicaea*, 76.
120. Though care should be taken not to read these texts as providing alternatives for not yet existing (fourth and fifth century) Christologies, it might be more worthwhile to ask what 'adoption' meant in a first-century setting, also from a legal perspective, and hence to focus on what the texts in question affirmed, rather than on what they, from a post-Nicene perspective, might seem to deny, but, from a historical perspective, could not deny, given that what they might seem to deny simply was not around to be denied. The question regarding the New Testament texts then simply becomes one of the use of terminology from the field of theocratic monarchy to describe the significance of Jesus Christ.

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