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**THE POWER OF BIBLICAL AUTHORS.
A RISK ANALYSIS OF 'LIVING' SACRED TEXTS**

Working Paper, ISSN 2747-9331
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Working Paper 2023/11
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The Power of Biblical Authors. A Risk Analysis of 'Living' Sacred Texts

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"Gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) im Rahmen der Exzellenzstrategie des Bundes und der Länder – Exzellenzcluster Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) EXC 2036/1-2020, Projektnummer: 390683433"

"Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – Cluster of Excellence Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) EXC 2036/1-2020, Project No.: 390683433"

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Abstract

New Testament authors claim immense (interpretive) power and generate strong asymmetrical dependencies between themselves and the communities they address. They are convinced that they have the resource of ‘salvation’, the authentic interpretation of the Christ event and access to the congregation. In research, this mostly hidden and sometimes even veiled establishment of pronounced power and dependency structures has hardly been systematically investigated. This is all the more surprising as biblical texts continue to be used in Christian churches worldwide to consolidate and legitimise structures of power and authority. Against this background, I inquire about the susceptibility of ‘living’ sacred texts to abuse, and I examine these texts with regard to their potential for risk and danger.

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I. Caught Between Two Poles: Situating this Essay Between the Poles of Diachronic Macro-History and Synchronic Micro-History

At the centre of this essay stands the following argument:¹ by functioning as decisive authorities of selection, the New Testament authors wielded immense power. They constructed strong dependencies on themselves and controlled the processes of generating and securing power. These unfolded in the communicative processes between the authors and their addressees and significantly influenced the concrete fashioning of their mutual relations.

The relevance and the transparency of these constitutive processes are strikingly disproportionate to each other: the processes mostly took place covertly, sometimes even in concealment, while the addressees continued to retain their direct influence on the power imbalance, and to have at least some say in determining the degree of their own dependencies. They 'forced' the powerful writer into a process of negotiating the prerogative of negotiation and the control of resources. Even though the authors claimed the power to control resources – such as closeness to Christ and an understanding of salvation and revelation – they still had to struggle for the addressees to accept this claim. If the addressees consented to a given concept, its author's authority in the community would increase considerably. But even this consolidated power would always be fragile, as the community could (at any time) revoke or qualify their approval.

So behind the New Testament texts there is a highly complex, reciprocal process whereby strong asymmetrical dependencies were generated and maintained. They have left traces in the texts, even though we sometimes have to read 'between the lines' to find them.

In my research project within the Cluster, I will explore my argument, namely that the authors had an immense, covert and at the same time fragile authority, in two exegetical case studies: looking at Paul as the oldest writer of epistles and at Mark as the earliest narrator of Jesus. The overarching investigative horizon of my exegetical analyses will explore constructions of strong asymmetrical dependencies in Paul and Mark and probe the multiple challenges, interactions and roles of these constructions. I will focus in each case on conceptions of God, Jesus and humans, of salvation and perdition, and of community, paying particular attention to how power, authority and hierarchy are perceived.

These wide-ranging subject areas are closely linked by a much larger perspective: I will ask, in each field, who established, accepted, controlled and negotiated the strong asymmetrical dependencies. I am interested in these actors' scope for action and in how they interacted in both vertical (i.e. between human and God) and horizontal (between humans) interactions. I am also interested in whether it is possible to detect any traces of protective or control mechanisms against the arbitrary exercise of power. When there are such traces, I will then focus on the interactions between the creation of such mechanisms and their theological roots. Even a cursory glance at the history of the influences and effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the New Testament texts clearly shows that these texts were – and continue to be – employed to secure and legitimize (strong) asymmetrical dependencies and pronounced hierarchical structures, e.g. within the worldwide Christian churches such as the Anglican,

¹ I sincerely thank Kirsten M. Schäfers and Ulrich Berges for their critical review of my reflections and further comments; I very much thank Imogen Herrad for the English translation.

Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Churches, and in the many different evangelical circles in a variety of local, social, economic and political contexts.

- (a) Thus, for example, statements from the Gospel of Matthew continue to play an authoritative role in the biblical justification of papal primacy,² or the grounds given for priestly celibacy.³
- (b) During a Catholic wedding service, the officiating priest confirms the marriage covenant after the couple has exchanged rings, and immediately afterwards emphasises the indissolubility of marriage with a quotation from the Gospels of Mark (and Matthew).⁴
- (c) Some Catholic dioceses invite their members to pray for their bishop. These prayers repeatedly take up the metaphor of the Good Shepherd, which in the Gospel of John refers to Jesus himself (cf. John 10:11), and portray the bishop as the shepherd of his flock.⁵

Of course, not every use of biblical texts to secure authority and hierarchical structures is automatically abusive. But traces of misuse can be found in cases where biblical texts are employed to generate authority in practical terms, especially when they use verbatim or even fundamentalist exegesis: When individual statements are completely taken out of their literary and historical context and used to substantiate 'one's own' positions. Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Joachim Kügler have referred to such uses of the Bible as 'a trick to assert one's own interests'.⁶

² Matt 16:18 '[Y]ou are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' This verse has been literally 'written in stone' in the large cupola in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

³ Matt 19:12: '[T]here are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.' The Law of the Catholic church, for example, alludes to this verse in can. 599: 'The evangelical counsel of chastity assumed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, which is a sign of the world to come and a source of more abundant fruitfulness in an undivided heart, entails the obligation of perfect continence in celibacy.'

⁴ Mark 10:9: 'What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate' (see also Matt 19:6). There are no hermeutical reflections on how to address 'absolute' prohibitions from the Jesus tradition in a context of church service. I am currently working on an ambiguity theoretical study of the prohibitions of divorce and remarriage in the New Testament.

⁵ See e.g. this example from the diocese of Augsburg: 'Jesus, du sagtest von dir: Ich bin der gute Hirt – und du warst es auch, der gute, beste Hirt [...] Bischof Bertram ist unser Hirt. Wir bitten dich: Erleuchte du ihn, dass er uns auf eine gute Weide führe' ('Jesus, you said of yourself, I am the good shepherd – and so you were, the good, the best shepherd [...] Bishop Bertram is our shepherd. We ask you to enlighten him to that he may lead us to good pasture.' <https://bistum-augsburg.de/Bistum/Bischof-Bertram/Gebet-fuer-den-Bischof> [accessed 03.03.2023]). After the retirement of Cardinal Joachim Meisner in 2014, the Archdiocese of Cologne invited their members to pray for a new Archbishop with these words, 'Schenke uns einen Bischof, in dem das Feuer des Heiligen Geistes lebendig und die Freude des Evangeliums spürbar ist, der uns mit der Liebe und Geduld eines guten Hirten im Glauben stärkt.' ('Give us a bishop in whom the fire of the Holy Spirit is alive and the joy of the Gospel is palpable, one who will fortify us with the love and patience of a good shepherd in faith',

https://www.erzbistum-koeln.de/erzbistum/erzbischof/amtsvorgaenger/joachim_meisner/emeritierung/gebete_um_einen_neuen_erzbischof/ [accessed 28.06.2023]).

⁶ Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Joachim Kügler, "Die Bibel und Homophobie in Simbabwe: Die Manipulation des Glaubens in der öffentlichen Diskussion," *Bibel und Kirche* 78 (2023): 35–40, 37. They illustrate such a use of the Bible with the example of the fight against sexual minorities in Zimbabwe. They mention amongst other cases the religious leader Ezekiel Guti (Pentecostal Church) and the Anglican Bishop of Harare, Nolbert Kunonga, as prominent actors in this fight. According to Gunda and Kügler, these actors used the Bible as their 'main weapon'.

When actors in church, politics or society use biblical texts to consolidate their own positions of power (e.g. the metaphor of the good shepherd),⁷ there is the permanent and eminent danger of relativising or limiting the power-critical potential of New Testament texts.

The New Testament texts' susceptibility to abuse and, at the same time, their continuing adoption around the globe, make it imperative that we study in depth their conceptions of power, authority and dependencies. I will examine in detail how the two texts that I have chosen – Paul's letter to the Philippians and the Gospel of Mark – construct strong asymmetrical dependency structures, both in terms of relations between humans and God and relations between humans, and to what extent these two fields interrelate. One of my foci will be on identifying those problematic weak spots which enabled or encouraged (later) abuse. In this context I will need to ask whether such weak spots were already identified in the New Testament texts themselves. If we can detect an awareness of the problem, we must next ask how Paul and Mark dealt with such weak spots: to what extent did they attempt to safeguard their constructions of power and dependencies against abuse?

The enduring global impact of the New Testament texts leads us to enquire into how they dealt with strong asymmetrical dependencies in the local contexts in which they were originally written in the first and early second centuries after Christ. This dynamic organically combines two of the Clusters's perspectives: the worldwide, epoch-spanning use of New Testament texts to establish and legitimize asymmetrical dependencies testifies vividly to these texts' susceptibility to abuse, which points us back towards the microhistorical and local circumstances in which they were written. What was the purpose of the constructions of asymmetrical dependencies in the concrete, original context of each text's creation (as far as this can still be reconstructed today)? And how did the author relate to the structures of power, authority and dependency in the world around him?

Behind my approach of looking for the original circumstances of each text's writing stands the conviction that it is possible to infer from the text itself its author's intention, and that this intention would to a certain extent have limited later uses of the text to establish and legitimize asymmetrical dependencies.

II. Focussing on Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies

At the centre of this essay stands the construction of asymmetrical dependencies that can be identified as 'strong'. Taking up a proposal by Julia Winnebeck, Ove Stutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, I base my approach on the following premise:

⁷ On the problematics and susceptibility to abuse of this biblical metaphor, see Thomas Großbölting, *Die schuldigen Hirten: Geschichte des sexuellen Missbrauchs in der katholischen Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2022): 10–16; see for example the following passage pp. 13–14 : 'Wo sich der Papst, die Bischöfe, die Priester in die Nachfolge des biblischen Jesus stellen, da reklamieren sie mit diesem Bild [sc. des guten Hirten] zwei eng miteinander verbundene Ansprüche für sich: Sie pochen auf Folgsamkeit und Gehorsam, da aus dieser Sukzession göttliche Nachfolge abgeleitet wird. Begründet ist dieser Anspruch mit der zweiten Seite des Hirtenamtes: der Fürsorge für die Gläubigen, zu der man sich bis hin zur Aufgabe des eigenen Lebens verpflichtet.' ('When the Pope, the bishops or the priests position themselves as successors of the biblical Jesus, they use this image [of the good shepherd] to make two closely related claims for themselves: they insist on compliance and obedience, as divine succession is based on this succession. This claim is based on the other aspect of pastoral office: care for the faithful, to which office holders are committed to the point of giving up their own lives.')

'Asymmetrical dependency is based on the ability of one actor to control the actions of another actor and/or their access to resources.'⁸ This type of dependency 'occurs within relations between two or more actors. The position of an actor can, in principle, be assumed by all entities, i.e., human beings, animals, elements of nature, material artefacts, gods, and spirits.'⁹ The asymmetrical nature of a dependency is made particularly evident by the fact that the dependent actors, B, normally cannot change their situation by either leaving without sanction ('exit') or articulating protest against their dependency ('voice').¹⁰ I classify such a dependency as *strongly* asymmetrical if the two actors A and B are vested with wholly diverging opportunities for power and enforcement (even if these are only imagined). Additional, decisive factors are the temporal dimension, the intensity of superordination and subordination, and the capacity of the superordinate actor to impact in the long term both central and day-to-day areas of the dependent's life. A dependency can be classified as the more strong and existential by the degree of hierarchical differentiation between superordinate and subordinate actor, the degree of systemic and institutional shaping of the dependency structure,¹¹ the degree to which the dependent actor's way of life is being determined by the dependency,¹² and the degree of permanency which is being ascribed to the dependency. In addition, there is the question of whether entry into dependency represented a radical break with the actor's social environment, and if so to what extent.

If we put these abstract observations into concrete terms for the present research project, the various constructions of dependency between God and human(s) take centre stage as objects of investigation. These constructions, which not infrequently happened behind the scenes or 'between the lines', linked two fundamentally unequal types of actors: temporal, finite humans, who were tied in place and history, were being related to a God who was (and is) being imagined as transcendent and credited with being able to act across place and time, assertively and effectively. The authors ascribed to this God the power to determine the entire course of earthly history across all epochs. Looked at in this way, the future would always also be a pre-determined future, which inevitably leads to the fundamental question of the human potential, scope and freedom for action.

Paul and Mark even imagined an extremely strong dependency 'within God'. They showed Christ as *also* being wholly subordinate to God. We can see traces of such constructions, for example, in Mark's passion narrative. In Mark 14:27 God (the subject) says that he will smite Jesus (the object). Such statements indicate that asymmetrical dependencies were not only

⁸ Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, "The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency," *Journal of Global Slavery* 8 (2023): 1–59, 8.

⁹ Winnebeck et al., "Asymmetrical Dependency": 7.

¹⁰ Cf. Winnebeck et al., "Asymmetrical Dependency": 8.

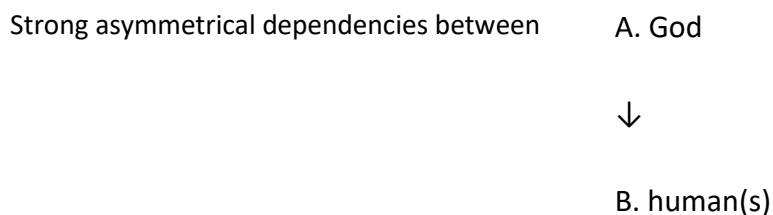
¹¹ This aspect concerns the distinction between dependence and dependency proposed by Christoph Antweiler, "On Dependence, Dependency, and a Dependency Turn. An Essay with Systematic Intent," *Discussion Paper 1*, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (2022), <https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/discussion-papers/dp-1-antweiler.pdf> [accessed 03.07.2022]: 2. According to him, dependence 'refers to the smallest unit conceivable, a relationship between at least two connected elements (A, B), where at least one has limited agency and autonomy or scope of action due to the linkage A–B. Dependency, on the other hand, is conceived of as a system or structural form of practice of several and/or time-continuous dependences as systemic unities.'

¹² Antweiler, "On Dependency, Dependence, and a Dependency Turn": 2 regards dependency 'as the holistic aspect of specified relations' and proposes *ibid*, that dependency 'may refer to a general social, cultural or even civilizational tendency or inclination to engage oneself or others in socioeconomic or socio-political relations that are characterized by dependence.'

elements of God's external relations with humans, but also permanently 'within God' himself. One strength of such a conception is that it brings human and divine realities closer together, which significantly endangers the rash justification of dependency structures by pointing to their origin 'in God'. In this essay, I will examine Paul's letter to the Philippians and Mark's Gospel specifically in terms of their constructions of dependency structures 'within God', and how these interact with and impact on human-divine dependency constructions.

III. A Power that is Frequently Concealed, Sometimes Even Masked: The Author as Creator of Asymmetrical Dependencies Between God and Human

The New Testament authors had a significant influence on the construction of strong asymmetrical dependencies in their texts, but for the most part did not make their capacity for influence transparent. Instead, they presented strong asymmetrical dependencies between human and divine entities essentially as relationships between two main actors or groups of actors. The texts ascribe extensive powers to God and Jesus, and imagine God as radically superordinate over subordinate humans. Humans are seen as wholly dependent on God's actions and decisions.



A good example of one such construction of dependency can be found at the opening of Paul's letter to the Philippians.¹³ Paul introduces himself as a slave of Christ Jesus, and thereby radically subordinates himself to his *kyrios* Christ. Later on in the text he demands that his addressees practice unconditional obedience, and revisits the subject of slavery in the community's founding narrative. He depicts Jesus as having deliberately chosen to take on the form of a slave and integrate himself into earthly structures of subordination and obedience. The interaction between Paul's conception of himself and his characterisation of Christ clearly shows him portraying himself as an imitator of his *kyrios*. From a pragmatic point of view, Paul generates considerable authority for himself over his addressees in the Roman colony at Philippi by subordinating himself to his *kyrios* and and claiming to authentically imitate the

¹³ I situate my reflections on the Letter to the Philippians in a complementary way to Hermut Löhr's approach in the Cluster, see Hermut Löhr, "'Divine Dependency' in Ancient Judaism and Emerging Christianity – Reflections and Case Studies," *Working Paper 4*, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (2022), https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/working-papers/wp4_lohr.pdf [accessed 03.03.2023]. He focuses on an 'archaeology of semantics and discourses' and blurred lines in his reading of Philippians: 'The line between the realms of human and super-human beings is also blurred by reference to heavenly, earthly, and underworld beings and their knees and tongues in vv. 10–11. These anthropomorphic references may lead us, at first glance, to assume that only human acknowledgment and praise is finally in view, but this reading would be erroneous (and any shortcut from v. 11 to the preliterate use of this text in praise and worship is methodologically unsound). The text stages here universal, even cosmic devotion to the (new?) Lord, and for this, it takes up the Jewish notion of the community of angels and human beings in divine worship. The effect thus created is that the narrative world sketched here is not that of traditional or everyday expectation or experience but a literary world in which divine and human agents interact' (Löhr, "Divine Dependency": 10).

latter's actions. As slave of his exalted lord he regards himself as entitled to issue directions to the community.

Strong asymmetrical dependencies between

A. God



C. Paul

As a slave of Christ Jesus, Paul radically subordinates himself to divine authority, and claims authority over the community on the basis of this imitation of Jesus' conduct .



B. human(s)

The fundamental problem of such a construction of dependency is above all its susceptibility to abuse. Construction of and control over the structures of dependency are wholly in the hands of a single person, namely Paul, the writer of the letter and founder of the community. His key position – like that of all New Testament authors – becomes fully evident when we take into account the transcendence of the biblical God. Hence, the classification of certain actions or statements as 'divine' is the result of human processes of attribution and negotiation. It is the task of humans to classify certain events or statements as divine. Part of this human task is further to interpret in more detail any action(s) or statement(s) so classified, and to infer – or demand, or sanction – particular human behaviours from these 'divine' action(s) or statement(s).

Paul has the authority of selection. He constructs

C. Paul



...strong asymmetrical dependencies between God and humans...

A. God



... and *at the same time* knows himself to be radically subordinate to God.

B. human(s) jointly with Paul

Paul, Mark and the other New Testament authors were the authoritative figures who decided questions of selection and control in the literary production process. It was within their power to make ultimate decisions over which actions or statements ascribed to God or Jesus they would include in their literary texts, in which way and with which functions and objectives.

The realization that the author plays a key role in the selection and presentation of their material does not come as an unbearable surprise when looked at from a literary studies perspective. But there has so far been almost no systematic investigation of the self-evident (again, from a literary studies perspective) consequences of this insight, i.e. the self-evident fact that decisive selection processes in dealing with constructions of power and dependency in New Testament texts were controlled by someone. The almost complete lack of such investigations is all the more astonishing as all of the New Testament texts claim for themselves the capacity to have a lasting impact on their (original) addressees' perception, assessment and shaping of reality.

The texts generally aim at 'external relocation' ('Hinausversetzung') from the literal into the real world, and at the creation and stabilization of real-world communities. These were always accompanied by the creation and/or stabilization of concrete dependency structures both vertically and horizontally. The horizontal, interpersonal sphere of dependency and its (non-)functioning were immediately comprehensible to people from their own, real-world experience.

The construction of dependency relationships and the demand for socially observable actions went hand in hand with the construction of theological rationales, legitimations and validations for the latter. These were intended to provide greater stability for the dependency structures, which in turn were to prove themselves as stable and developed structures over time.

This reciprocal dynamic between the construction and the theological legitimation of dependency structures – whether between God and humans, or between humans – has continued for the New Testament texts without interruption into the twenty-first century. The texts continue to be seen as 'living' key documents by global Christian faith communities, who continue to use them even now specifically to construct and stabilize power and dependency relationships. This uninterrupted practical deployment of New Testament texts makes any investigation of power and dependency relationships extremely topical and highly socially relevant. I would like to make a contribution to a discussion of New Testament dependency constructions that involves an (even stronger) critique of power – both in the academic field of exegesis and in social (church) contexts.

The necessary investigation of the susceptibility to abuse of strong asymmetrical dependency constructions in New Testament texts will be greatly helped by an analytical approach that involves ambiguity theory. I will employ a two-level concept of ambiguity in my descriptive language. On a basic level, I do not limit the term to its strict etymological, binary, meaning (which, literally translated, is 'both meanings'), but will employ it as a generic term that also embraces aspects of indeterminacy, polysemy and obliqueness.¹⁴ I accept a narrower

¹⁴ My use of these terms is based on Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt [Was bedeutet das alles?]* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2018): 15, which defines the word 'ambiguity' as 'Begriff für alle Phänomene der Mehrdeutigkeit, der Unentscheidbarkeit und Vagheit, mit denen Menschen fortwährend konfrontiert werden' ('a term for all phenomena of ambiguity, indeterminacy and vagueness with which people find themselves confronted on a continual basis'); see also Verena Krieger, "'At War with the Obvious' – Kulturen der Ambiguität. Historische, psychologische und ästhetische Dimensionen des Mehrdeutigen," in *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, ed. Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader, *Kunst, Geschichte, Gegenwart 1* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2010): 13–52, quote at 15 n. 13.

conceptualisation, in the sense of an ‘antagonistisch-gleichzeitige[n] Zweiwertigkeit’ (‘an antagonistic, simultaneous bivalence’),¹⁵ where, in the words of Ulrich Berges, ‘Mehrdeutigkeiten so zu Polaritäten verschärft sind, dass der Fokus nicht mehr auf dem Oszillieren zwischen den Extremen liegt, sondern diese selbst in den Mittelpunkt rücken.’ (‘Ambiguities are intensified into polarities to such a degree that the focus no longer lies on the oscillation between the extremes, but on the polarities themselves’).¹⁶

This narrower conceptualisation is particularly suitable for capturing and sustaining that basic tension in its polarity which we encounter, time and again, in the dependency constructions of New Testament texts when we view them through the lens of textual production. The focal issue is the contrasting simultaneity of, on the one hand, the author’s subordination under divine authority, and on the other his actual literary power over the divine. The fundamental challenges of this ambiguous general situation emerge clearly when actions or statements by God that are within the author’s control are used to legitimize and justify certain dependency structures. Or to put it differently: the New Testament authors claim to be legitimized by God or Christ to compose their texts, but at the same time it is they who control which of God’s or Christ’s utterances are to be transmitted and used in their literary works, and in which ways.

Paul is a case in point: he presents himself as a person who, as a slave, is wholly subordinate to divine authority, and radically at its mercy. But the absolute need for divine actions or statements to be interpreted makes the ‘disturbing’ opposite equally relevant: Paul ‘controls’ God and Jesus by selecting their utterances and the actions ascribed to them. As an actor of the world portrayed by the texts, God is brought into the human realm of authority through the literary production process. As a result, there is no independent, ‘divine’ controlling authority for the literary conceptions, even though they consistently display their commitment to such an authority, suggesting an *as-if structure*.

The absence of an independent (possibly ‘divine’) controlling authority is extremely challenging – especially where literary constructions of dependency structures and their aspiration to real-world manifestation are concerned. In the literary production process, a ‘balance of power’ between the divine and the human creator frequently recedes into the background.

The necessary focus on the New Testament authors as controlling key figures in the construction of divine-human and interhuman dependencies prompts the next questions:

¹⁵ Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer, “Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz. Die Struktur antagonistisch-gleichzeitiger Zweiwertigkeit,” in *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz*, ed. Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009): 7–30, at 10: ‘Strukturelle Ambiguität ist der Name, den wir [...] einer antagonistisch-gleichzeitige Zweiwertigkeit generierenden Matrix geben.’ (‘Structural ambiguity is the name we give to a simultaneous, antagonistic bivalence-generating matrix.’) The authors argue that this narrower definition of ‘ambiguity’ enables ‘präzisere und schärfere analytische Zugriffe auf Strukturen, die Effekte und Artikulationen simultaner und zugleich widerstrebender Zweiwertigkeit hervorbringen, als der bloße, wenn auch nicht unbegründete Verdacht, dass “irgendwie” fast alles in unserer (post)modernen Zeiten als zwei-, mehr- oder vieldeutig, also als ambivalent zu beschreiben wäre.’ (‘more precise and acute analytical access to structures that produce effects and articulations of a bivalence that is both simultaneous and antagonistic, than that which could be gained from the mere, albeit not unfounded, suspicion that “somehow”, almost everything in our (post)modern era could be described as ambiguous, equivocal or polysemic, i.e. as ambivalent.’)

¹⁶ Ulrich Berges, *Die dunklen Seiten des guten Gottes. Zu Ambiguitäten im Gottesbild JHWHs aus religions- und theologiegeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013): 33.

which goals did the authors pursue with their constructions? Which function did they, for instance, ascribe to their constructions in situations of community creation and community stabilization?

IV. Beginnings of a 'Balance of Power' – the Recipient's Anticipated Control Function

The fact that the New Testament authors had control over the divine in the literary production process does not mean that they were completely oblivious to tradition, or that they created their theological conceptions arbitrarily. Paul repeatedly and expressly drew on tradition (see for example 1Cor 11:23–25 or 15:3b–5); Mark belonged to a community that was able to respond to his theological conception. The members of his community were in a position to accept or to criticise his conception, while Mark, in turn, was dependent on their agreeing with his theological conception, if this draft was to have the (intended) effect in the community.

If we look at the central, pragmatic foci of the New Testament texts, such as identity reassurance or group stabilization, the following assumption emerges: in the processes of communication, the only surviving components of which are the New Testament texts, the original addressees exercised a certain measure of control over the production process. This control became theirs because they had to react in some way to each theological conception with its pronouncements by God and Jesus, its treatment of tradition, its constructions of dependency and its ethical claim. The addressees made a decision on the extent to which they found a given conception convincing and were willing to put it into practice:

	sender(s)	↔	recipient(s)
Paul constructs as <i>the</i> authority on selection ...	C. Paul	... and pursues concrete goals ...	B. concrete persons
	↓	... such as community stabilization;	with the capacity to respond to a given theological conception.
strong asymmetrical dependencies between God and humans	A. God	socially observable implementation of instructions for behaviour 'on the ground';	
	↓	acceptance of and compliance with the constructed dependencies.	
... and <i>at the same time</i> knows himself to be radically subordinate to God	B. human(s) jointly with Paul		

The sender's dependency on the recipient's approval reveals in stark detail the fact that *the construction and acceptance of dependency structures is a reciprocal and immensely fluid process of negotiation between sender and recipient*. We can describe this reciprocal relationship as a mutual dependency, of both entities on one another, of hybrid asymmetry. The author, with his theological-ethical power of interpreting the Christ event, was superordinate and superior to the community. He asserted considerable authenticity and authority for his interpretation. At the same time, he was wholly reliant on his addressees accepting his theological conception and putting it 'into practice'.

In this hybrid asymmetry, degrees of superordination and subordination were determined in considerable measure by the recipients' autonomy and independence. The opportunities for community members to access alternative (Christian or non-Christian) interpretations of meaning and of life 'on the ground' also played a not insignificant role.

The likelihood of the two parties approaching a balance of power increased with the recipients' degree of independence. The more independent and autonomous the community conceived of itself vis-à-vis the writer in question, the greater was its capacity to exercise a control function. If the writer experienced the community he addressed as potentially highly independent, and anticipated a wide range of alternative potential interpretations 'on the ground', he (probably) had to make a critical evaluation: the higher he wanted the likelihood to be that the community he addressed would actually put into real-world practice the asymmetrical dependencies he had constructed, the higher the degree of precision with which he had to weigh up their opportunities and limits.

V. The Dynamic, Fragile Simultaneity of Extremely Strong and Very Weak Asymmetrical Dependencies in New Testament Texts

All of the literary constructions of divine-human dependencies (A – B) must, when viewed from the perspective of the New Testament authors, be classified as very *strongly asymmetrical*. This is true both in quantitative and qualitative terms. I make this classification on the grounds of the following observation: the New Testament writings consistently express the fundamental conviction that only God (and Jesus) freely decide how salvation and perdition are allocated. This lends them a significant, and lasting, influence on the continued existence of individuals both in this world and in the next. Acceptance of this puts human existence entirely into divine hands. Thought of in this way, divine-human dependency substantially impacts all public and non-public areas of human life, such as family and social life, work and sexuality. The *intensity* of these unequal, divine-human dependency constructions in the New Testament manifests itself in the ability ascribed to God to influence all central aspects of human life.

The (literary) construction of such an extremely asymmetrical dependency between God and humans also benefited its creator (i.e. the writer). His increased importance is palpable, for example, in Paul's letter to the Philippians, where it takes concrete shape in Paul presenting himself as an authentic role model for a life that is divinely ordained and conformed to Christ. According to him, adherence to his own mode of action promises soteriological success. By positing himself as a role model, Paul attempted to tie the community more firmly to himself in the face of the (potential) emergence of rivals or adversaries, and so considerably to consolidate his own authority.

Further analysis of the authors' scope for control, enforcement and sanctioning is of crucial importance to assess more accurately the intensity and strength of the asymmetrical dependencies they constructed. I will base my analysis on a catalogue of questions formulated by Christoph Antweiler. He analyses dependencies as a form of control and asks the following questions of the subjects and objects of control:

[W]hat is the specific substance that is controlled? Is it *physical mobility* (corporal immobility, bondage through debt, incarceration), *actions* (limited agency or sexuality; cf. less freedom), or *resources*? This includes restricted or prevented access to territory, to resources (one's own or others'), or the power to prevent others from using one's own resources. But control can also be achieved by limiting the emotions of the individual or by limiting the experiences of a person or a collective. One issue of control in terms of historical projects might be the distinction between a person's or a group's intentionally limited physical mobility vs. unintended immobility (via geographical isolation or social isolation from compatriots).¹⁷

The authors of the New Testament texts claim the ability to control access to 'spaces' both in this world and in the next. While such abilities to control access to the future salvific community in the hereafter are still of a rather theoretical and abstract nature, any ability to control access to the (gathered) community 'on the ground' would have had immediate and very much concrete ramifications. The New Testament authors claimed for themselves the ability to define who was – and who was not – allowed to participate in communal life 'on the ground'; take for instance Phil 3:2.18–19, where Paul sharply and polemically distances himself from any potential (Jewish) Christian rivals. A feature held in common by all texts is the sanction imposed on any theological rivals, namely their – socially clearly perceptible – exclusion from the community – or, more precisely, the sanction all authors would have liked to impose. Because where this was concerned the communities wielded considerable determinative influence, as it was they who put into practice the sanctions and the exclusions demanded by the writer – or not, as the case might be.

Any statements about how existential and enduring the effects of a ratified and implemented exclusion from the community actually were for the person so excluded must remain speculation, because of our lack of sources. We can only conjecture which factors may have influenced how those affected experienced the event. The most impactful factors very likely included:

- (a) the extent of their social and religious rootedness in the community in question,
- (b) the number of their extra-communal connections and, where applicable, the latter's stability and quality, and
- (c) their access to alternative interpretations and religious communities.

The stronger an individual member of the community identified with the belief in Christ (dimension of content), and the stronger they felt themselves to be part of the local community (social dimension), the fewer alternative interpretations they encountered 'on the ground', and the stronger therefore the break with their traditional living environment was

¹⁷ Antweiler, "On Dependency, Dependence, and a Dependency Turn": 9.

likely to be, the more enduring, serious and existential a member of the community will have experienced their exclusion from it.¹⁸

The factor ‘number of their extra-communal connections’ is an obvious further criterium for assessing the strength of a dependency relationship. The ‘severity’ of the asymmetrical dependencies correlated with the radicality required if one wanted to follow Christ:¹⁹ to what extent did a given New Testament text expect a radical break with existing ties, such as familial or social ones? The Synoptic Gospels, for example, could adopt quite radical positions, expecting would-be followers of Jesus to fundamentally break all existing ties and not tolerating a ‘look back’ (see for example Mk 10:23–27, 28–29). My question is how Mark, the first narrative theologian of the New Testament, transformed this radicalism of the early Jesus movement in (and for) his own time, the 70s CE when he composed his Gospel, and how he may have adapted it – and his construction of dependencies – to better suit the situation of his addressees.

These reflections lead me, finally, to the much larger question of how Mark and other New Testament authors (wanted to) define and shape the relationship between themselves, their Christ communities and the wider world around them. Even a cursory glance at the Gospel of Mark, the Acts of the Apostles, the First Epistle of Peter or the Revelation of John reveals very different perceptions of the relevant provisions, which range from complete repudiation to positive and constructive integration. My awareness of this diversity leads me to enquire into possible reciprocal effects between a given position on the church-world axis in Paul and Mark, the ‘severity’ of a given dependency construction, and the reliability of potential control mechanisms.

¹⁸ On the subjects of community membership and exclusion, a link can be made to a project planned by Kirsten M. Schäfers at the BCDSS: drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s concept of ‘total membership’, she asks to what extent priestly claims to authority (some of which occurred many centuries later) tend in this direction.

¹⁹ For Antweiler, in empirical research on dependence it made ‘the most sense to begin by exploring the moments when relationships break up, break down, or are intentionally unmade (“unmaking”). An extreme but telling example is the forced cutting of all kinship ties, as in many forms of slavery.’ Antweiler, “On Dependency, Dependence, and a Dependency Turn”: 9.

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