

Article

Where Scripture and Tradition First Meet: How the Field of the Early Reception of the New Testament May (Re)Shape the Academic Dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox—Romania as a Case Study

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Abstract: In recent years, Evangelical scholars in Romania have shown a growing interest in studying the early reception of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the Pre-Nicene Fathers (c. 90–300 CE). In parallel, a new generation of Romanian Orthodox scholars has come to appreciate the importance of a critical approach to both Scripture and Christian Tradition. As a result, fresh common ground is currently taking shape in academia: a critical approach to the early reception of the New Testament. This presents an opportunity for both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars in Romania to come together and explore certain issues of faith that have not been previously explored in this way. Since there are already several hints that the early reception of the New Testament could lead to a more meaningful dialogue, an innovative project has been initiated to further the hypothesis. The ongoing project involves five Evangelical New Testament scholars and five Orthodox New Testament scholars independently researching the same five obscure passages in the New Testament (Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6 and 1 Peter 3.18–22). Each passage is analyzed independently by one scholar from each denomination using the same methodology, i.e., a critical dialogue between exegesis and reception history. The forthcoming volume aims to assess not only the value of this approach for academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania, but also to estimate other potential gains should this method be applied on a larger scale, such as in various international ecumenical projects. There is one overarching question behind this project that still awaits a response: if the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet?

Keywords: Scripture and Tradition; early reception of the New Testament; New Testament Evangelical scholarship; New Testament Orthodox scholarship; academic dialogue; Romania



Citation: Drimbe, Amiel. 2023. Where Scripture and Tradition First Meet: How the Field of the Early Reception of the New Testament May (Re)Shape the Academic Dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox—Romania as a Case Study. *Religions* 14: 1323. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101323>

Academic Editor: Razvan Porumb

Received: 6 September 2023

Revised: 10 October 2023

Accepted: 10 October 2023

Published: 22 October 2023



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1. Introduction

Romanian Evangelicals are Baptist, Pentecostal, and Brethren Christians that belong to the *Evangelical Alliance of Romania*. However, since Brethren scholarship is currently still emerging (e.g., [Leonte 2020](#), pp. 14–15, 37–39), this study will focus on the Baptists and Pentecostals. Both denominations were established at the beginning of the twentieth century, soon after the foundation of the modern state of Romania (1918).¹ The Romanian Baptist Union was founded in 1920 ([Popovici 2007](#), pp. 288–94), while Pentecostals requested official recognition in 1924 ([Bălăban 2022](#), p. 43).² Accordingly, these two years will constitute the *terminus a quo* of the research.

Since their establishment in Romania, Evangelicals have maintained their own distinctive way of reading the scriptures. Given the dominant Orthodox background, this distinctiveness has largely meant the avoidance of any interaction with Patristic literature, particularly when the *meaning* of a biblical text was discussed. Scripture and Tradition were

seen as antagonistic for most of the period following the 1920s, until a new generation of Evangelical scholars emerged after the demise of communism in 1989.

In the following sections, I will survey the evolution of Romanian Evangelical New Testament scholarship and its parallel evolution of interest in Patristic literature, with a special emphasis on the pre-Nicene authors and their reception of the New Testament (c. 90–300 CE). For this growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament creates a new opportunity for Romanian Evangelical scholars, specifically, to read New Testament texts through hermeneutical lenses similar to those of Romanian Orthodox scholars. For centuries, Orthodox and Protestants (Evangelicals included) have shown that reading similar religious texts does not necessarily lead to similar conclusions. Should similar texts be read through similar hermeneutical lenses, would there be more compatibility in their religious views? In an attempt to answer this question, a comparison will be drawn between Orthodox and Evangelical readings of a given New Testament text (Ephesians 1.4–5). Then, an ongoing Evangelical–Orthodox project will be introduced. The project is designed to test the value of the early reception of the New Testament approach for the advancement of the academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox. If the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet?

2. Romanian New Testament Evangelical Scholarship—General Background

Romanian New Testament Evangelical scholarship has undergone a relatively recent evolution. During the period of the 1920s–1980s, i.e., prior to and during the Communist regime (1947–1989), higher education was inaccessible to the majority of Romanian Evangelicals. Formal theological training was also a limited option, principally available through the Baptist Theological Seminary (founded in 1921) and the Pentecostal Theological Seminary (founded in 1976),³ albeit with significant constraints from the national government. For instance, both seminaries faced severe limitations on student enrolment. In 1980, at the Baptist Theological Seminary only five students were permitted to enrol, followed by ten in 1984, four in 1986, and five students in 1987 (Bunaciu and Bunaciu 1997, pp. 224–25; Drimbe 2024). The Pentecostal Theological Seminary experienced similar fluctuations in student enrolment, enlisting five students in 1980, then a noticeable hiatus ensued until 1984 when limited admissions were reintroduced. The years between 1986 and 1989 witnessed the acceptance of only three students per annum (Bălăban 2016, pp. 119–20). Although the term “seminary” might suggest undergraduate theological education, these institutions offered basic, pre-university training. It was only after the collapse of Communism that the seminaries were transformed into fully-fledged academic establishments, becoming the Baptist Theological Institute and Pentecostal Theological Institute, respectively (Drimbe 2024).

Due to the adverse political climate, the emergence of the first PhD in the field of the New Testament came late, only in 1998. Alexandru Neagoe holds the distinction of being the first Romanian Evangelical (Baptist) to earn a PhD in the New Testament (Neagoe 2002). Since 1998, approximately thirty other Romanian Evangelicals have been awarded PhDs in New Testament studies (Drimbe 2024). Thus, the pivotal year 1998 marked the inception of a novel era in Romanian New Testament Evangelical scholarship, a benchmark against which some comparisons will be drawn below.

Furthermore, it is significant that the initial ten PhDs in New Testament studies awarded to Romanian Evangelicals are from institutions in the United Kingdom and North America (Mănăstireanu 2007). This aspect bears both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, these emerging scholars were being ushered into the realm of internationally recognized academic research, thereby setting elevated standards for subsequent New Testament Evangelical scholarship in Romania. On the other hand, it underscores a lack of interdenominational collaboration during the Communist period. The Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu posed challenges due to linguistic barriers, as it exclusively offered training in Hungarian (Cluj-Napoca) and German (Sibiu). The Orthodox institutions refrained from admitting Evangelical students, invoking theological

incongruences and the vocational nature of the curriculum. However, these restrictive actions should be attributed to the prevailing political circumstances. Only a few Evangelicals were awarded theological degrees by accredited Romanian institutions at the time. Notably, none of the degrees was in New Testament studies (Drimbe 2024).

The theological landscape underwent another significant transformation in the 2000s, spurred by a burgeoning, interdenominational collaboration in academia that took root during the initial decade following Romania's emergence from the Communist era (1990–2000). During this period, a noticeable shift occurred as a number of accredited theological institutions began to embrace a more inclusive stance, welcoming Evangelicals into their fold. As a result, an increasing cohort of postgraduates opted for local educational opportunities. In a watershed moment during 2009, Ciprian Terinte was awarded a doctorate from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Sibiu (Terinte 2010). His achievement stands as another historic milestone, as he became the first Evangelical scholar to earn a PhD in New Testament studies from a Romanian institution, all the more so as it is an institution of Orthodox affiliation.

In the subsequent decade (2010–2020), a cohort of ten scholars followed suit, with half of them earning PhDs from Romanian Orthodox and Catholic institutions (Drimbe 2024). This surge in Evangelical scholars undertaking advanced theological studies at non-Evangelical institutions is testament to the evolving dynamics of interdenominational scholarly pursuits within the Romanian academic landscape.

3. Romanian Evangelical New Testament Scholarship and Patristic Literature—Before and after 1998

3.1. Scripture vs. Tradition: 1920–1998

Between the years 1920, marking the establishment of the Romanian Baptist Union, and 1998, when the first Romanian Baptist was granted a PhD in the New Testament, the output of secondary literature on the New Testament by Romanian Baptists remained rather modest, comprising approximately 25 monographs and textbooks (Bel and Ghioancă 2017). Remarkably, no scholarly articles concerning the New Testament had been published prior to this juncture. As for the Pentecostals, their publications are even fewer. Only five monographs related to the New Testament emerged between 1924 and 1990 (Bălăban 2013). Also, prior to 1999 and the inception of *Plērōma*, the theological journal of the Pentecostal Theological Institute, scholarly articles delving into New Testament studies were notably absent. This scarcity of written works can be primarily attributed to the persistent constraints imposed during the Communist regime, which routinely suppressed the publication and dissemination of Evangelical literature. Added to this, the authors of these publications were not New Testament scholars in the modern technical sense. Consequently, they predominantly confined their works to introductory level studies (Drimbe 2024).

More relevant to this study, however, is the noticeable absence of scholarly engagement with Patristic literature among these scholars. Early Church authors such as Papias, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Eusebius of Caesarea are mentioned rarely and almost exclusively in relation to introductory matters: the authorship of a New Testament book, dating, language, early traditions about the martyrdom of Jesus' Apostles, and so on. Hardly any of these early Christian authors are cited when the *meaning* of a certain text is discussed. Also, any interaction with Patristic literature is indirect. Furthermore, all references to Patristic authors are taken from Protestant and Evangelical English-speaking authors. A paradigmatic case is that of John R. Socaciu (1926, 1928). His works *Armonia Evangheliilor* [*A Harmony of the Gospels*] and *Studii în Noul Testament* [*Studies in the New Testament*] are, in fact, translations and slight adaptations of the renowned American New Testament Baptist scholar A.T. Robertson's *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Robertson 1922) and *Studies in the New Testament* (Robertson 1915). Socaciu studied under Robertson at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, USA. It is from this place that he brought these two studies into Romania. Robertson (1915) refers to "early Christian

writers" and "tradition" when he discusses, e.g., the preservation of the few uncanonical sayings of Jesus, the last years and martyrdoms of Paul, Peter, and John, the last years and suicide of Pontius Pilate, the authorship of the Book of Hebrews, the provenance of 1 Peter, and Gnosticism in 1 John. In his adaptation of Robertson's writing, Socaciu follows this approach closely.

Robertson/Socaciu set the tone for the marginal use of Patristic literature in New Testament studies in Romania. This approach, which continues through to Ioan Bunaciu (1981a, 1981b, 1989), was consistent with the view that *sola Scriptura* implies, among other things, a reticence to cite any "tradition" in order to uncover the meaning of a biblical text. It also maintained the popular yet academically unproductive dichotomy that Evangelicals deal with Scripture while the traditional Churches deal with Tradition.

3.2. *Beginnings and Transition: 1998–2009*

Things changed, however, after 1998, and especially after 2009, once Romanian Evangelicals began to study at Orthodox and Catholic institutions. Thus, the decade 1998–2008 marks the transition toward including Patristic literature in New Testament studies. As was mentioned above, the first ten Romanian Evangelicals earned PhDs in the New Testament from the United Kingdom and North America (Mănăstireanu 2007; Drimbe 2024): Alexandru Neagoe (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 1998); Octavian Baban (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 1999); Radu Gheorghită (University of Cambridge, 2000); John Tipei (University of Sheffield, 2000); Sorin Sabou (London School of Theology/Brunel University, 2001); Benjamin Fărăgău (Queen's University Belfast, 2002); Crinișor Ștefan (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003); Corneliu Constantineanu (Oxford Centre for Mission Studies/Leeds University, 2006); Corin Mihăilă (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006); and Cristian Barbosu (Trinity International University, 2009). Given their research interests and the Evangelical affiliation of most of the doctoral schools these scholars attended, the interaction with Patristic literature is very rare. In most cases, it is almost non-existent. In some cases, it is minimal, yet significant for this initial stage. Among the noteworthy representatives of this transitional period are Gheorghită, Sabou, and Mihăilă.

(1) Radu Gheorghită is, to my knowledge, the first scholar to use the Early Fathers critically when discussing a New Testament text in detail. In his thesis (2000, 2003), Gheorghită analyses the role of the Septuagint in the Book of Hebrews, with a special emphasis on Habakkuk 2.3–4 in Hebrews 10.37–38. When discussing the textual variants of Habakkuk 2.3–4 in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac, he surveys the reception of the text in several Patristic authors, such as Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, "and possibly Ambrose and Ambrosiaster" (Gheorghita 2003, pp. 156–59). Gheorghită, then, directs his attention to the reception of Habakkuk 2.3–4 in the New Testament and briefly examines its four occurrences. Three occurrences are in Paul: Romans 1.17 (twice) and Galatians 3.11. The fourth occurrence, to which "special consideration" is given throughout several chapters, is in Hebrews 10.37–38. Before delving into contextual and theological analysis, the textual variants are once again scrutinized. At this point, his focus expands to encompass "the frequent appearance of Hab. 2:4 in the writings of the Greek Fathers . . . quotations . . . from their exposition of either the Pauline epistles or Hebrews . . ." Three textual variants are cited from Eusebius' *Demonstratio Evangelica* and three are cited from Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* (Gheorghita 2003, pp. 157–58). Once the issues of textual criticism are dealt with, Gheorghită moves on to show how different textual variants of Habakkuk 2.3–4 may be used to make different theological points. In this case, the author of Hebrews uses the LXX Habakkuk in order to align the scriptural portrait of the coming Christ with the one emerging from the earthly life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and, by doing so, reveal his theological indebtedness to the Greek textual tradition of the Jewish Scriptures.

Gheorghită's approach represents a significant stride in the progression toward employing the Early Fathers in the interpretation of the New Testament. Commencing with this study,

the Patristic writers are referenced not merely in relation to introductory or secondary matters, but to unveil diverse critical issues and connotations within a biblical text.

(2) Sorin Sabou discusses in his doctoral dissertation (2005) the debated meaning of the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ in Romans 5.12: διὰ τοῦτο ὥσπερ δι' ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντα ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον . . . In order to uncover the meaning of ἐφ' ᾧ, Sabou cites Augustine, Pelagius, and Cyril of Alexandria. For Augustine, ᾧ [ὅς] is a masculine relative pronoun with the phrase ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου as the referent (Sabou 2005, p. 125). For both Pelagius and Cyril of Alexandria ἐφ' ᾧ is a conjunction meaning “because”, yet their views of ἥμαρτον [ἁμαρτάνω] disagree with each other. Pelagius argues that ἥμαρτον refers to “men’s sinning in their own persons quite independently of Adam, though after his example” (Sabou 2005, p. 126). Cyril, on the other hand, considers that ἥμαρτον means “actual sinning”. This view is “in contrast to the Pelagian view in that men’s sinning is related to Adam’s transgression not merely externally but also internally, as being its natural consequence” (Sabou 2005, p. 126). Sabou goes on to interact with modern scholars, e.g., Cambier, Danker, Cranfield, Fitzmyer, Moo, and Bruce. Following interaction with Bruce (1985, pp. 126, 230), Sabou synthesizes the two historical views: “Because Adam *is* mankind all are said to have sinned in his sin. Thus, the theological content of Augustine’s interpretation is put together with the grammatical understanding of Cyril and Pelagius concerning ἐφ' ᾧ” (Sabou 2005, p. 127). In addition to taking the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ “as having a consecutive meaning”, Sabou considers that “the reference of ἐφ' ᾧ [includes] the *reality* of death” (Sabou 2005, p. 130).

Sabou’s research stands among the first examples of a Romanian Evangelical scholar using the Early Church authors to determine the meaning of a debated phrase in the New Testament.

(3) Corin Mihăilă’s (2009) approach is similar to that of Sabou. Although his interaction with Patristic literature is minimal and indirect, he also makes use of it in search of the meaning of a disputed term, as is μετασχηματίζω in 1 Corinthians 4.6: ταῦτα δέ, ἀδελφοί, μετεσχημάτισα εἰς ἑμαυτὸν καὶ Ἀπολλῶν δι' ὑμᾶς, ἵνα ἐν ἡμῖν μάθητε τό. The Church Fathers cited by Mihăilă are Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Theophylact of Ohrid. While Mihăilă admits that Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Theophylact give the natural meaning of the verb μετασχηματίζω, “changing the form of something into something else” (Mihăilă 2009, p. 207), eventually he offers a more nuanced and contextual interpretation of the verb, considering its meaning to be more complex than the Church Fathers acknowledged: Paul suggests that he has changed the discussion about preachers and the Corinthians, in general, to a discussion about himself and Apollos, implying thus that the argument he builds in the section is not true only of the former (Mihăilă 2009, pp. 209–12). Although he approaches the Patristic sources indirectly, closely following contemporary research (e.g., Vos, Hall, Lampe, Thiselton), the interaction is still there.

Gheorghită, Sabou, and Mihăilă are representative of this initial stage, as they make use of the Patristic literature when interacting with New Testament texts, aiming to establish a certain textual variant or searching for the *meaning* of debated terms and phrases.

3.3. Development and Climax: 2009–2023

(1) As was noted above, Ciprian Terinte (2010) is the first Romanian Evangelical to earn a PhD from an Orthodox institution. Moreover, he inaugurates a new stage in regard to the use of Patristic authors for New Testament interpretation. His interaction with the Church Fathers is broader (engaging with more Patristic authors) and deeper (in terms of analysis). He interacts at length with twelve Patristic authors and eighteen of their writings, covering a period that spans from Hermas (c. 150) to Gregory Palamas (c. 1296–1359). Given the Orthodox affiliation of the doctoral school, there is an apparent preference for the Greek Fathers: nine out of twelve are Eastern.

More significantly, Terinte engages the Patristic literature in order to uncover the *theological meaning* of certain texts in the New Testament, mainly Pauline. For instance, there is a rather unexpected view regarding the foundation of the Church—unexpected, given his Pentecostal affiliation. On the day of the “Christian” Pentecost (Acts 2), the Church came into existence as a missional community, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The establishment of the Church was definitively not initially realized on this occasion. The constitution of the Church is initiated at the incarnation of Christ (Terinte 2010, pp. 115–17). Under the influence of John Chrysostom and Simon the New Theologian, Terinte utilizes the Adam–Eve and Christ–Church parallelism (Ephesians 5.22–32; cf. Genesis 1.26–27; 2.24) to assert the beginnings of the Church as follows: “Eve was not yet created, but she was there in Adam’s rib, and therefore existed with him. Through His very incarnation, Jesus Christ carried the Church within Himself. . . Just as Eve came out of Adam’s rib, so the Church came out of Christ’s side” (Terinte 2010, pp. 115–16, 296–97). Just like the patriarch Levi, who paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham, for he “was in the body [or: in the loins] of his ancestor” (see Hebrews 7.9–10), so also the Church existed in the body of Christ before Pentecost.

(2) Terinte’s interaction with Patristic literature, in terms of both quantity and detail, is unparalleled to date—if only monographs are considered. Yet his research is indicative. Since 2009, Romanian Evangelicals have shown a growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament, with an emphasis on the Pre-Nicene Church Fathers. Within Romanian Evangelical academic circles there is a general agreement that pre-Constantinian Christianity had not yet split into different denominations and that there are numerous traces and trajectories of Apostolic Christianity, with which Evangelicals identify.

I would include at this stage the bulk of my own research. After graduating from the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest (BTh, 2003), I pursued post-graduate studies in Biblical and Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Alba Iulia, Romania (MTh, 2008). It was during this period that I became particularly interested in the Apostolic Fathers and, especially, their reception of the New Testament. I have continued to pursue this interest, as can be seen in my doctoral dissertation (Drimbe 2018, 2020) and subsequent publications (Drimbe 2018, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

In an attempt to stimulate the development of the earliest reception of the New Testament field among Evangelicals in Romania, in 2015–2016 I initiated, together with Sorin Sabou, a research project called “Unele lucruri greu de înțeles” [“Some Things that are Hard to Understand”] (see 2 Peter 3.16). For the majority of scholars, among the most obscure passages in the New Testament are Matthew 27.51–53; Luke 16.9–12; John 6.53–59; Romans 9–11; 1 Corinthians 15.29; 1 Peter 3.18–20; and 1 John 5.16–17. As part of the project, all of these passages are to be analyzed considering their earliest reception: how they were interpreted during the pre-Constantinian Christian era. Since the project has been innovative (even experimental), the contributors were limited to New Testament scholars that teach or have taught in different capacities at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest or the Faculty of Baptist Theology, University of Bucharest—where both I and Sorin Sabou teach. At the same time, the volume aimed to foster a more fruitful academic dialogue between Romanian Evangelical and Orthodox/Catholic scholars (Drimbe 2024). Yet, for several reasons, the publication of the “Some Things that are Hard to Understand” volume was repeatedly delayed. Two of the major reasons for the delay will be revealed in the following sections.

(3) I consider the climax of the interest in the early reception of the New Testament to be the forthcoming “Seria Comentarii Exegetice Românești” [“Romanian Exegetical Commentary Series”] (SCER). Broad discussions regarding the particularities of the series began back in 2012, but it was only recently that a decision was reached. What is unique about SCER is that it is written from an Eastern Evangelical perspective and also from the perspective of the early reception of the text. Each New Testament writing is interpreted in dialogue with predominantly two Fathers of the Early Church, one from the East and one from the West. The commentaries are written almost exclusively by Romanian

Evangelicals, including some of the scholars mentioned previously: Drimbe, Gheorghită, Mihăilă, Sabou, and Terinte. The only non-Romanian contributor is H.H. Drake Williams III, Associate Professor of the New Testament at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium. Williams, a long-time guest lecturer at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest, co-authors several volumes in the series. He also acts as one of the general editors; the other general editor is Octavian Baban, Senior Lecturer at the Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest. A noteworthy reason regarding Williams' involvement is that he plans to have a similar series written in English, incorporating several contributions from SCER, that is to be published by Gorgias Press.⁴

A consequence of the SCER project is that Evangelical New Testament scholars from Romania interact for the first time with Patristic authors on a national scale. More importantly, this series has the potential to open fresh topics of dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox/Catholics. An example regarding the series' potential to generate meaningful dialogue will be provided in the following section. Also, the preparation and launch of this series constitute one of the reasons for the delay of the "Some Things that are Hard to Understand" volume. However, it is not the prime reason.

4. The Romanian Exegetical Commentary Series (SCER) and Orthodox New Testament Scholarship—A Comparison

The first volume to be published in SCER is the commentary on Ephesians. It is co-authored by Baban and Williams, the general editors of the series. In the commentary, Baban/Williams interact extensively with Marius Victorinus, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret of Cyrus. It is this interaction that creates a plethora of possibilities for dialogue. To exemplify this, a brief section of Baban/Williams' commentary, namely Ephesians 1.4–5, is to be compared to the corresponding section of Stelian Tofană. Tofană is Professor of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca and a senior figure of Romanian Orthodox scholarship.⁵ Ephesians 1.4–5 is preferred for the comparison, due to its theological significance for Protestant thinking. In regard to the text, Tofană makes the following comments:

the election of Christians represents an act of God's eternal love that calls upon its recipients to lead lives of holiness: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him" (1.4). Through Jesus Christ, the elected are embraced as children of God through adoption, revealing yet another facet of God's love, with the aim of salvation and redemption: "In love, He predestined us to adoption as children through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (1.5). Therefore, the rationale behind this choice lies in God's "predestining" Christians to become His children. However, the concept of "predestination" relates more to WHAT will happen, rather than to WHO will be elected. In other words, the predetermined destiny of Christians is that ALL of them will become fully entitled children in Christ Jesus, not just a select few. Hence, the "divine predetermination" mentioned in the text doesn't pertain to any confessional interpretation, such is the teachings about predestination in Protestant theology. (Tofană 2006, p. 53; author's translation).

Tofană reads the text from a traditional Orthodox perspective. At the same time, he explicitly challenges the Protestant view. His emphasis lies on the purpose of predestination, rather than the persons being predestined, on "what", rather than on "who": "chose us... that we would be holy and blameless"; "predestined us to adoption as children". For Tofană, the Pauline "we/us" refers to Christians in general, i.e., those who "have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of... wrongdoings, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1.7).

On a similar note, Baban/Williams write:

The verse conveys a profoundly positive message that should be appreciated as such, without misinterpreting its message. God elects a people for Himself from among all humanity. . . . Although certain commentators may be concerned about God's selective election (some are chosen, some are not), we should focus on the positive way Paul presents this truth. Ephesians 1 does not portray God as the One who rejects, but elects. . . . The purpose of the election is that all Christians would be holy and blameless. The NTR and EDCR versions of the Bible [the New Romanian Translation and Dumitru Cornilescu Revised Edition are Romanian Evangelical versions—a.n.] use the phrase "in order to", the Greek text uses the stronger infinitive of purpose *einai*. God elects with a purpose. . . . In his sermon on Ephesians 1.4, Chrysostom writes the following about the purpose of being elected to be holy: "You have been chosen to be holy and blameless before His face. He Himself has made us holy, yet we are called to remain holy. . . ." (Baban and Drake Williams 2024; author's translation).

The similar emphasis on the purpose of election, rather than on the persons being elected, is noteworthy—and Chrysostom's citation is used to strengthen this point. There is also the general language with reference to those elected: "a people. . . from among all humanity"; "all Christians". In line with their Protestant perspective, Baban/Williams also highlight that God's election of Christians does not imply that God rejects others.

The similarities and distinctions of the above comparison lead to some intriguing theological and practical questions. Is predestination essential or marginal in God's plan of salvation? If God's election concerns primarily a purpose and not persons, what does this reveal about those being elected? Is God's elective purpose restrictive/exclusive, conditional, both, or neither? Who is a Christian, in the light of God's election? If God's eternal purpose is "holiness and blamelessness", can there be Christians that are living unholy and blameworthy lives? What is the relationship between divine purpose and Christian ethics? If the elect are all the adopted children of God, what are the benefits and limitations of Christian confessionalism? The emphasis on the purpose of God's election could stimulate reflection for both Evangelicals and Orthodox, particularly on issues like Christian identity, ethics, and communion. Moreover, it could incite fresh dialogue.⁶

The benefits of a New Testament commentary series such as SCER for the dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox/Catholics remain to be assessed in the future. For now, however, it should be noted that, at the core of the emphasis on the purpose of God's election, there stands the citation of Chrysostom. It is also noteworthy that only a few years ago a comparison like the one above would not have been possible.

5. Where Scripture and Tradition First Meet—Could Evangelicals and Orthodox Finally Meet There?

It is beyond the scope of this study to survey Orthodox New Testament scholarship in Romania. A few general comments will suffice. The beginnings of critical engagement of the New Testament are related to the scholarship of Vasile Gheorghiu (PhD, 1897), considered the first Romanian Orthodox New Testament scholar in the modern sense (Roventă 1932, p. 275). While Orthodox scholars traditionally interpreted the New Testament in the light of Patristic literature, for most of the 1897–1990 period, their reading of both collections was predominantly confessional and infrequently critical (see, e.g., Tofană 2024). Similar to the Evangelical trajectory, Orthodox New Testament scholarship has experienced significant developments after the demise of communism. A new generation of scholars emerged, with improved critical methodology and international recognition. Among these, I consider Daniel Batovici (2019a, 2019b, 2021) and Cosmin Pricop (2016, 2018, 2019, 2020) to be prime representatives.

This is the first time in the Romanian context that both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars have approached the reception of the New Testament in Patristic literature in a highly critical manner. For centuries, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants have shown that

reading similar religious texts does not lead to similar conclusions. Now, we can pose the too-often-neglected question: if Evangelicals and Orthodox scholars were to read similar texts through similar lenses, would there be more compatible views? Since Evangelicals are more open to interacting with Pre-Nicene Fathers, might a common reading of the New Testament in their light be the starting point? Moreover, it is suggestive that the reception of the New Testament in the pre-Nicene writings is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet.

In early 2023, Cosmin Pricop (Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest) and I adapted the “Some Things that are Hard to Understand” project. This constitutes the main reason for the delay of the initial volume. Five Evangelical New Testament scholars (myself included) and five Orthodox New Testament scholars (Pricop included), all Romanian, are to research five of the most obscure and disputed passages in the New Testament already mentioned: Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6, and 1 Peter 3.18–22. Each passage is analyzed by one Evangelical and one Orthodox scholar, using the same methodology: a dialogue between modern exegesis and the earliest reception of the New Testament (c. 90–300 CE). The two scholars are to work independently, without sharing notes or ideas. The results of the research project will be published in a volume with each passage rendered twice and in parallel, from both Evangelical and Orthodox perspectives. Following the ten contributions, two chapters will synthesize the findings, assess the utility of the approach, and estimate potential gains—including whether this method is to be applied on a larger scale, such as various international ecumenical projects. One chapter will be written from an Evangelical perspective (Drimbe), one from an Orthodox perspective (Pricop). An ending chapter, co-authored, will draw final conclusions and suggest further developments.

Could the reception of the New Testament in the Pre-Nicene writings, where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, provide common ground for a more meaningful dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania? While the theological and academic value of the project remains to be assessed after the publication of the volume, its mere existence is in itself a noteworthy achievement.

6. Conclusions

Over the past twenty-five years, Evangelical scholars in Romania have shown a growing interest in the early reception of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the Pre-Nicene Fathers (c. 90–300 CE). In parallel, a new generation of Romanian Orthodox scholars has come to appreciate the importance of a critical approach to both Scripture and Christian Tradition. As a result, fresh common ground is currently taking shape in academia: a critical approach to the early reception of the New Testament. This presents an opportunity for both Evangelical and Orthodox scholars in Romania to come together and explore certain issues of faith that have not been previously explored in this way.

As the comparison between the research of Baban/Williams and that of Tofană has shown, the early reception of the New Testament approach has the potential to produce a more meaningful dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox. To further test its potential, an innovative project was initiated in early 2023. The project involves five Evangelical New Testament scholars and five Orthodox New Testament scholars, independently researching the same five obscure passages in the New Testament: Matthew 27.51–53, Romans 9–11, 1 Corinthians 15.29, Hebrews 6.4–6, and 1 Peter 3.18–22. Each passage is analyzed independently by one scholar from each denomination using the same methodology, i.e., a critical dialogue between exegesis and reception history. The resulting volume aims to assess not only the value of this approach for academic dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox in Romania, but also to estimate other potential gains should this method be applied on a larger scale, such as various international ecumenical projects.

The overarching question that is behind this project still awaits a response: if the early reception of the New Testament is where Christian Scripture and Christian Tradition first meet, could it also be where Evangelicals and Orthodox finally meet? In the meantime,

there is an expectation that a positive response could lead to further projects, in which passages that are more divisive for Romanian Evangelicals and Orthodox could be examined following the same methodology. In addition, this case study may inspire other similar projects in international or denominational scholarly groups, where interest in the reception of New Testament scholarship is rising.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The modern state of Romania was founded in 1918, when the regions of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania were added to the United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia.
- ² Although their request was rejected by the Romanian government, it shows that in 1924 there were enough Pentecostal churches to establish a confessional association. Also, in 1924, the first Pentecostal confession of faith was published in Romania (Bălăban 2022, p. 43).
- ³ However, the Pentecostal Theological Seminary has functioned unofficially and intermittently since 1948 (Bălăban 2016).
- ⁴ The announcement regarding the new series, *Early Christian Writers: A Commentary Series*, is available on the Gorgias Press website: <https://www.gorgiaspress.com/early-christian-writers-a-commentary-series>. URL (accessed on 4 September 2023).
- ⁵ Stelian Tofană is the current president of the Union of the Biblical Scholars in Romania.
- ⁶ While scholars of other denominations might also interpret Ephesians 1.4–5 in this way, this is the first time that Evangelical scholars in Romania read the text in a way that is compatible with the Orthodox view.

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