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PART ONE

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THE BEGINNINGS: THE NEW TESTAMENT TO IRENAEUS

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A.

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LITERARY GUIDE

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1

Introduction: the literary culture of the earliest Christianity

FRANCES YOUNG

The last 200 years have seen considerable swings in the literary assessment of the earliest Christian literature, including as it does the texts which became the canonized Scriptures of the Church, but not just those. The pendulum has been affected partly by new discoveries, but changing perspectives have also played their part. A series of interrelated questions has emerged from the principal debates:

(1) In what sense are Christian texts 'literary'? How do they relate to other literature that has survived from antiquity?
(2) Which texts should be included in the category 'Christian'?
(3) From what social level and cultural milieu did these texts issue? To what extent are they to be assessed as the deposit of an oral and non-literary environment? How is the transition to written texts to be evaluated?
(4) Do peculiarities of language, rhetoric or genre set these texts apart? Or are they typical of the time and circumstances from which they emerged?
(5) How are these texts to be read? Is it enough to evaluate them as historical documents, relating them to the historical circumstances in which they were generated and the literary culture to which they originally belonged?

Some of these questions will be considered in Part I B, but it is an illusion to think that a description of the literature can be offered without essaying some answers.

Investigators of the nineteenth century had inherited and challenged certain distinctions. The first was the distinction between texts deemed to be canonical and the rest, that is, those that had been included in the New Testament and associated with the Old Testament to form the Bible, and those that were not so privileged yet still held authoritative as 'patristic', being the work of the Fathers of the Church. Whereas in the Orthodox East such works are believed to contain all of theology and to be the authoritative texts for interpreting the Scriptures (a position analogous to the role of the Talmud in Judaism),

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the effect of the Protestant Reformation in the West had been to reinforce the distinction. This was now challenged, however, on historical grounds: certain texts eventually excluded were earlier in date than some that were included in the biblical canon. The tracing of a historical sequence reflecting historical development required the abandonment of canonicity as a criterion in assessing the literature.

Against that background there emerged the notion of distinguishing between the 'primitive literature' of the Christian movement and that produced after the adoption of the forms of Greco-Roman literary culture. It was, of course, evident all along that judged by the standards of classical literature the earliest Christian texts fell short. The ancient charge[1] that the apostles were illiterate and ignorant and that Christianity flourished among women and slaves carried some weight because scholars trained in the classics could immediately see how these texts were wanting in sophistication of style and composition. In the earlier half of the twentieth century, the low-class, 'popular' nature of the movement and its literature seemed to be confirmed by comparing the language, style and genres with the many everyday papyri – accounts, business letters, legal and personal documents, etc. – discovered in Egypt.[2] So the letters of Paul were treated as occasional, personal letters, not to be compared with literary epistles, and the Gospels as the assemblage of sayings and stories that had circulated for at least a generation in oral form. Indeed, 'gospel' was treated as a new and unique literary genre, invented by Mark and then to be aped by other writers, both orthodox and heretical.

The second distinction inherited and challenged in the nineteenth century was that between orthodox and heretical literature. The transmission of the texts from antiquity had been in the hands of the Church. The Church was interested in what was dogmatically sound. Anti-heretical literature was preserved, but not the texts of those condemned. Orthodoxy was regarded as the pure and pristine truth revealed, later distorted by heretics. The notion that doctrine developed through history, however, stimulated an interest in the contribution made by heresy to that development. Furthermore, concern to discover the historical Jesus or the historical Socrates was paralleled by a fascination with reconstructing the life and teaching, not only of approved characters, but also of notorious heretics. This interest was reinforced by remarkable new discoveries, ever increasing as the twentieth century proceeded, and these discoveries became part of the literature now to be studied.[3] The long-familiar extant literature had to be placed in a much larger literary context, indeed an ever-expanding environment as theories of the non-Christian – indeed pre-Christian – origins of gnosticism subordinated the orthodox texts

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within a larger interpretative framework. This larger literary world was not the world of the classics, of high culture, but a kind of literary underworld, lying at the confluence of oriental religions and Hellenistic mysteries.

These two challenges to the way the texts had been received arose from modern historical consciousness, and the literary guide in Part I A reflects both: canonical and non-canonical, orthodox and heretical writings are introduced side by side. But postmodern literary and hermeneutical questions may reopen issues concerning canonicity and authority, and sociological approaches mean that the world from which these texts emerged can now be viewed rather differently, at least partly because questions about their literary character have been raised in new ways.[4] Perspectives are refined (1) if questions are asked not so much in terms of reconstructing a religio-cultural milieu by exploiting parallels between texts (the History of Religions approach) but in terms of intertextuality; (2) if rhetorical intent and social function assume greater importance than questions of authenticity, authorship and date; (3) if anxiety about the historicity of events behind the text is submerged by focus on interpreting the text itself; (4) if the character of the discourse is analysed, in terms of the effect it could or should produce, the world it creates and into which it invites the reader; and (5) if the identification of genre is taken as a crucial clue to how a text is to be read.

Early Christianity had its matrix among Jews. This obvious fact has to assume importance in considering the character and environment of early Christian literature, if only because an examination of its 'intertextuality' shows a deep acquaintance with the literature of the Jewish community, at least in its Greek form. The Law and the Prophets, the Psalms and some wisdom-books are not only quoted but frequently alluded to or in various ways aped in the whole range of material under consideration. The particular genre of 'apocalyptic' was produced by Jewish and Christian authors over a period of some 500 years spanning the genesis of Christianity. It is likely, given their traces in early Christian literature, that 'testimony-books' were produced, collections of 'oracles' culled from the Law and the Prophets, sometimes with adaptations or commentary to demonstrate fulfilment, and that likelihood is enhanced by the discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran of fragmentary texts of that form, 4Q Testimonia and 4Q Florilegia. It is in Jewish texts that precedent can be found for the ways in which biblical material is shaped and interpreted in works such as the Epistle of Barnabas, not to mention the writings within the New Testament.

'Judaism' (Ἰουδαϊσμος) was a word parallel to 'Hellenism'. It referred to the culture of the Jewish race (ἔθνος). Just as the Greeks had lawgivers, and

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the prophetic oracles of the Sibyls, and a literature of great antiquity on the basis of which all education was conducted, including the moral formation of the citizen, so the Jews had their own great lawgiver, Moses, and their own books of prophecies, and a literature which the young were trained to read and live by. The earliest Christians were Jews nurtured in the Jewish tradition. Crucial to the understanding of early Christian literature was the question raised increasingly in the latter part of the twentieth century: how are we to conceive 'the parting of the ways' between Jews and Christians? What are the implications of the fact that gradually it was not people of Jewish but of other ethnic origins who took over the literature of the Jews, claiming it as their own, and who, while rejecting the literary culture of their own upbringing, actually read their adopted books, and wrote their own, with the assumptions of 'Hellenism'? There lies the significant transition, rather than a supposed shift from oral to written culture, or indeed a change from 'primitive', unselfconscious, writing to the norms of the literary elite. Early Christianity was always rooted in a 'book' culture, but from the standpoint of the Greco-Roman world it was alien – 'barbarian', in fact.

There is, however, another remarkable aspect of this early Christian book culture which has been revealed by accumulating archaeological evidence. Literature was normally inscribed on rolls. Christian texts from the earliest known date appear in codex form, the forerunner of the book. Wax-tablets had long been joined by leather thongs to form 'notebooks', but no one before the Romans thought of arranging parchment or papyrus in this way. Even then such 'notebooks' were only used in schools and businesses; they were not 'proper books'. For literary texts the transition from roll to codex did not take place until the fourth century, and for the copies of Torah ceremonially read in the synagogue Jews have retained the scroll form to this day. How is it then that the Christians adopted the codex form for their texts – not just their compositions, but even the Scriptures they had taken over from the Jews? The oddity is reinforced by the fact that Christian scholars of the third century went back to having their works written on rolls!

Explanations have been sought, sometimes practical, such as greater convenience for quick reference or for travelling missionaries to carry, sometimes more ideological, such as precedents set by the original form of Mark's Gospel or the Pauline Epistles,[5] or the use of notebooks to assemble 'testimonies'. Probably a complex range of factors contributed, including maybe the 'blasphemous' reduction of the sacred Jewish texts to the status of mere witnesses to Jesus Christ – Ignatius insists on the superiority of Christ to 'ancient books' (*Philad.* 8). But most significant here is the point that the book culture of

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early Christianity was physically that of day-to-day business, suggesting that, at any rate at first, those who belonged to the communities that valued this literature, though not aspiring to any kind of literary or educated elite, were nevertheless accustomed to dealing with documents. This coheres with other research which has modified the idea that the earliest Christians were low-class or belonged to some kind of underworld.

Ancient society was not stratified by class, so much as made up of competing households which were themselves hierarchies, consisting not only of the kinship group but also of employees, dependents, servants and slaves. The Christian communities were based in such urban households,[6] and their patrons and leaders must have had some social status and considerable economic power. Levels of literacy would have been extremely varied across the household community; doubtless for the most part it would have been a pragmatic skill required for business. On the other hand, most city dwellers would have some awareness of literary norms, since all reading was aloud, often in social settings, and all public communication reflected rhetorical conventions. Indeed, the majority of illiterate people would have been familiar with writing and its uses, employing scribes to write letters or other necessary documents. The 'notebook' would be the everyday vehicle for records rather than the literary roll; so here is the context in which handy collections of teachings or testimonies would begin to be compiled. Here, too, is the context in which the letter would become the primary genre.

The very earliest Christian texts are the letters of Paul, a Jew and Pharisee formerly known as Saul. The old attempt to distinguish letters and epistles can hardly be sustained, though in origin the authentic letters were certainly occasional documents issuing from the practical need to maintain communication and sort out problems. These 'everyday' letters in fact follow the generic conventions of letters from the wider Greco-Roman world, yet radically adapt them to specific Christian needs (see below chapter 2). The Pauline letters are after all rooted in the wider world of the literatures of antiquity yet at the same time distinctive. A similar case can be made for the Gospels: they have significant analogies with the biographical literature of the period, though also distinctive features.

The Pauline letters also set a precedent: letters are the actual or assumed genre of a great deal of the earliest Christian literature. Furthermore a letter from an 'apostle' became the authoritative form in which to address the difficulties of a subsequent generation. Indeed, pseudonymity is a feature of a good deal of the material purporting to come from the first two hundred years of Christian literary activity – how much remains a contentious issue. Modern

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critical scholarship has been exercised with determining which texts are authentic, whether traditional attributions have any basis, and what might be the provenance of anonymous texts such as Hebrews. Postmodern critical theory, with its emphasis on the 'death of the author', might enable a greater focus on the nature of these texts as rooted in communities. The significant thing about attribution has to do with what Foucault would call the 'author-function':[7] it is not without significance that the process of canon-formation involved the attempt to distinguish writings that were 'apostolic'. The reception of the texts may be as significant in terms of literary history as their provenance.

So the nineteenth-century challenges to the way this literature has for the most part been received may need to be reviewed. In biblical studies, canon criticism has reopened the question whether the formation of a canon and the effective turning of many books into one does not change the way the texts are read. Are we to read these works simply as documents which provide windows on to the past? Or should our reception of them take into account, not only what they implicitly claim to be through their genre and discourse, but also the effect of their transmission, as scripture, as 'patristic', as heretical? To such questions we will return in chapter 10.

Notes

1 Origen repeatedly faces such criticisms from Celsus: e.g. *Cels*. 1.62.
2 E.g., the classic study by Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*.
3 E.g., the discovery of the Mandaean literature dramatically affected the researches of the History of Religions School in the early twentieth century; the Nag Hammadi library, found in Egypt in the 1940s, fuelled continued research into gnosticism in the second half of the century.
4 Frances Young, 'From Suspicion and Sociology to Spirituality: on Method. Hermeneutics and Appropriation with Respect to Patristic Material', 421–35.
5 See C. H. Roberts, 'Books in the Greco-Roman World and in the New Testament', and Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*.
6 The importance of the household for understanding the ancient social context of Christian groups has been repeatedly emphasized in New Testament studies since around 1980; e.g. David C. Verner, *The Household of God. The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles*.
7 M. Foucault, 'What is an author?', in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101–20.

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