

The Origins of Early Christian Literature

Conventional approaches to the Synoptic gospels argue that the gospel authors acted as literate spokespersons for their religious communities. Whether described as documenting intragroup “oral traditions” or preserving the collective perspectives of their fellow Christ-followers, these writers are treated as something akin to the Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk* – a questionable framework inherited from nineteenth-century German Romanticism. In this book, Robyn Faith Walsh argues that the Synoptic gospels were written by elite cultural producers working within a dynamic cadre of literate specialists, including persons who may or may not have been professed Christians. Comparing a range of ancient literature, her groundbreaking study demonstrates that the gospels are creative works produced by educated elites interested in Judean teachings, practices, and paradoxographical subjects in the aftermath of the Jewish War and in dialogue with the literature of their age. Walsh’s study thus bridges the artificial divide between research on the Synoptic gospels and classics.

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The Origins of Early Christian Literature

*Contextualizing the New Testament within
Greco-Roman Literary Culture*

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-108-79313-1 — The Origins of Early Christian Literature
 Robyn Faith Walsh
 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
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 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108793131

DOI: 10.1017/9781108883573

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First published 2021
 First paperback edition 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

NAMES: Walsh, Robyn Faith, 1980– author.

TITLE: The origins of early Christian literature : contextualizing the New Testament within
 Greco-Roman literary culture / Robyn Faith Walsh.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes
 bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2020023256 (print) | LCCN 2020023257 (ebook) |
 ISBN 9781108835305 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108793131 (paperback) |
 ISBN 9781108883573 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Bible. Gospels—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Christian literature,
 Early—History and criticism. | Classical literature—History and criticism. | Christianity
 and literature—History—To 1500.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BS255.52 .W36 2020 (print) | LCC BS255.52 (ebook) |
 DDC 226/.067—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020023256>
 LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020023257>

ISBN 978-1-108-83530-5 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-108-79313-1 Paperback

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For my parents, Thomas and Kathleen Walsh

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Preface

On January 29, 1885, a man known only as “C.B.W.” traveled from Berlin to Zürich by means of a meandering train.¹ Prone to understatement and with an economy of words, he described the vistas of timber, mines, and “craggy” castles from his compartment window as he crossed the Elbe (“a large river”) and the Rhine (undescribed) and arrived in Switzerland (“hilly”) and, ultimately, his “handsome” destination.² Our mystery man was there to call upon a certain Gustav Volkmar, Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Zürich, and President of the Society of Critical Historical Theology. His purpose in visiting Volkmar is unclear. But he found the professor and his daughter “so congenial” that he “determined to remain some weeks” in their company.³

In the course of this ambiguous residency, C.B.W. had occasion to attend a number of Volkmar’s lectures. His record of these talks, and Volkmar’s interactions with his students and interlocutors, is a time capsule, of sorts, of a particular kind of discourse in the European academy at the fin de siècle:

The lectures of the President to his class, were sufficient to mark him as a pronounced liberal. He took occasion in one of his lectures to explain to the class that there could not have been an eclipse of the sun at the time of the crucifixion,

¹ “C.B.W.” is likely Charles B. Waite, according to the index of writers presented in the front matter of the volume, as I will discuss. See “Notes of Travel,” *Chicago Law Times*, vol. 2, ed. Catharine V. Waite (Chicago: C. V. Waite, 1888), 326–28.

² Waite, “Notes of Travel,” 326 ³ Waite, “Notes of Travel,” 326–27.

because it was at the time of the full moon. This I thought was good science but weak theology.⁴

I confess that the phrase “good science but weak theology” pops into my head quite often. And then there were Volkmar’s thoughts on the resurrection and his position in the field:

At another time, he asked the class what was the nature of the resurrection of Christ, and when one of the students answered, “Es war eine erscheinung,” the old gentleman replied, “Das ist recht.” On returning from class, I asked him, if the resurrection was only an appearance, how he explained the rolling away of the stone from the tomb. He replied, “There was no tomb. Jesus was put to death as a malefactor, and such were denied burial.” Some of our divines would be shocked at these doctrines, but Professor Volkmar is paid by the State as a religious teacher. I asked him if the more orthodox professors did not make war upon him. He replied that they had done so in former years, but had concluded to let him alone. They went their way, and he went his.⁵

These anecdotes are from a somewhat obscure source: a back-page travelogue for the 1888 edition of the *Chicago Law Times*. I came across a scanned copy of C.B.W.’s “Notes of Travel” while researching Volkmar, and found the periodical in which it is contained to be highly eclectic in its content: a series of articles on various legal cases, as one might expect, are presented alongside gems like “Diogenes or Antipater, Which?,” an article that manages to connect the Stoic wisdom of Cicero to the sale of a barren, blooded cow in Michigan. The editor of the periodical, one Catharine V. Waite, boasts an impressive résumé as an activist, suffragist, lawyer, and polymath in Chicago, leading protest movements and founding a number of literary societies, support networks for women, and, among other ventures, the seemingly short-lived *Chicago Law Times*. (Incidentally, rumor has it she was also more than capable with a six-shooter.)⁶ “C.B.W.” is almost certainly her husband, Charles Burlingame Waite, a lawyer appointed by President Abraham Lincoln to the Utah Supreme Court during the Civil War. His “Notes of Travel” from Paris to Berlin to Zürich and back again are, at once, absorbing and, for a fellow scholar of New Testament more than a century later, poignant.

⁴ Waite, “Notes of Travel,” 327. ⁵ Waite, “Notes of Travel,” 327.

⁶ “Catharine Van Valkenburg Waite,” in *Women Building Chicago 1790–1990: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Rima Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 922.

Take, for example, Waite's chronicle of one of his last conversations with the then seventy-five-year-old Volkmar:

The last day I was in Zurich, we took a long walk together . . . we took a seat on a bench near that magnificent lake . . . I told him we should probably never meet again in this life . . . and asked him if he did not believe in another state of existence.

The old man turned upon me his large full eye, with a suddenness that was almost startling. "Why do you ask this?" He said. I replied, I had no object except simply to know his opinion. "Well," said he, with deliberation, "that is something I know nothing about. All the teachings of Jesus related to this life. The Kingdom of God which he was seeking to establish, was to be upon the earth. To live again, is something to be hoped, but nothing is revealed to us upon the subject. The arguments in favor of a future existence must be drawn from outside the gospels."⁷

On the cusp of the turn of the century and all that lay beyond – advancing industrialization, globalization, continued imperialism, and, crucially, the world wars – Volkmar's lectures and beliefs offer a glimpse into a historical moment arguably eclipsed by the tumult of those subsequent years. The advent of Higher Criticism, a free(er) press, and the emergence of liberal politics in the latter decades of the nineteenth century allowed scholars like Volkmar to occupy positions in the European academy. Yet, as assuredly as any tide rises, an increasing concern for the secularization of society and, by extension, the university, brought forward a Protestant-Catholic backlash expressed through a variety of "repressed neoromantic narratives" and strategies. Among these strategies was an approach to the New Testament and its historical context that used these writings as a tool to reclaim and revive the "spirit" and "faith" of the middle-class in Germany, Switzerland, England, France, and beyond. Practices like *Religionsgeschichte* promised to reveal lost communities of fellow-believers, merging a "scientific" approach to antiquity with the opportunity for a "renewal of faith."⁸ Scholarly and popular interest in so-called Christian origins, the layers and dates of early Christian texts, evidence for the oral traditions of a lost *Volk*, and the historical Jesus became a fairground for litigating debates old and new: Had liberal theologians and scholars neglected faith with their critical methods?

⁷ Waite, "Notes of Travel," 327–28.

⁸ Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 253.

Overdetermined the value of so-called orientalism? Forgotten “the people”? As the founder of Form Criticism, Hermann Gunkel, lamented at the turn of the century in *Die Christliche Welt*:

If God had wanted me to have a voice that would penetrate the hearts and minds of every scholar of theology (*die Herzen und Gewissen der theologilchen Forfcher dringt*), I would proclaim . . . do not forget your holy duty to your people (*Volk*)! Write for the educated (*die Gebildeten*)! Do not talk so much about literary criticism (*Litterarkritik*), text criticism (*Textkritik*) . . . but talk about religion (*redet über Religion*)! . . . Our people thirsts [*sic*] for your words about our religion and its history (*Unfer Volk dürftet nach euren Worten über die Religion und ihre Gefchichte*)!⁹

What constitutes “religion” in Gunkel’s construction are the very things that the *traditionsgeschichtliche* method sought: the interests, practices, and concerns of “lost” peoples and communities, their beliefs, their lives, and their oral stories. To the extent that a piece of writing like Paul’s letters or one of the canonical gospels represents a historical moment, for those sympathetic to the work of this segment of the Religions-Historical School, they also represented the “culmination of long periods in which religious ideas and practices were transmitted orally and informally.”¹⁰ Classically trained philologists had little interest in *koiné* or Silver Greek and left the theologians to it. Over time, a conceptual divide grew within scholarship between the literate, culturally and socially elite Greek and Roman writer and the humble, illiterate peasant. Increased interest in material culture, newly found papyri from places like Oxyrhynchus, and a Romantic desire to reclaim the Greco-Roman world (à la the Grand Tour) reinforced the idea that there were communities outside the text yet to be discovered. As Adolf Deissmann proclaimed in his *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte aus dem hellenistisch-römischen Welt* in 1908, the “primeval prejudices of the Atticizers” had obscured “the embeddedness of primitive Christianity in folk culture (*die*

⁹ Hermann Gunkel, “Ein Notschrei aus Anlaß des Buches Himmelsbild und Weltanschauung im Wandel der Zeiten,” *Die Christliche Welt* 14 (1900): 58–61, cit. 60. I have taken some liberties with the translation of “über die Religion” above; by including the article “die” Gunkel is implying that there is one religion – Christianity – that is of primary concern. For this reason, I elected to use “our” to convey the same meaning. This quote is also cited by Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 263, albeit with a different translation.

¹⁰ Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 266.

Volkstümlichkeit des Urchristentums).¹¹ The faith and cohesion of these humble, illiterate so-called primitive Christians had much to offer the Wilhelmine and Victorian and Weimar Christian facing the threat of cultural secularization. And the development of new scholarly, *wissenschaftliche* methods made it possible to demonstrate that Christianity had been, from the beginning, a religion by and for the people. More maliciously, it would also enable scholars to link these early Christians to a pursuit of Aryan history, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

At its core, this book is a study of the “knowledge-making practices” of the field of early Christianity and New Testament studies, its assumptions about communities and authors, and its possible alternatives.¹² Conventional approaches to the Synoptic gospels argue that the gospel authors acted as literate spokespersons for their religious communities. Whether described as documenting intragroup “oral traditions” or preserving the collective perspectives of their fellow Christ-followers (e.g., the Markan, Matthean, or Lukan “churches”), the gospel writers are treated as something akin to the Romantic Poets speaking for their *Volk*. By contrast, Greek and Latin authors describe themselves writing within (and for) literary networks of fellow *writers* – a competitive field of educated peers and associated literate specialists who possessed the necessary training and the technical means for producing and publishing their own writings. This is a more plausible social context for the gospel writers. And it is this social context that this book examines, questioning how our understanding of early Christianity changes once we shift our frame from inherited notions of community, *Volk*, and *Geist* and, instead, bring new methods from literary theory and the broader social sciences to bear on these writings.

This monograph argues that the Synoptic gospels were written by elite cultural producers working within a dynamic cadre of literate specialists – including persons who may or may not have had an understanding of being “in Christ.” Through comparison with a range of ancient *bioi* (lives), histories, and novels, this study demonstrates that the gospels are creative literature produced by educated elites interested in Judean

¹¹ Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte aus dem hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr Siebeck, 1908), 282; Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 269.

¹² Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, xxxiii.

teachings, practices, and paradoxographical subjects in the aftermath of the Jewish War. It provides a more concrete account of the processes by which the gospels likely were written and establishes that they are in dialogue with writings and writers of their age rather than assuming that they were produced by or for “Christian communities.”

Despite the title of this monograph, I do not seek “origins” for early Christianity and the gospel writers in the sense that I am not attempting to assert the uniqueness – or unique genesis – of Christianity. Likewise, I do not scrutinize dates for these writings, and I do not engage in extensive critiques of specific members of our guild. Instead, I am interested in offering a broad-based examination of how we have practiced scholarship in the field of religious studies, followed by constructive suggestions on how we might approach that practice differently. As I explain in the Introduction, a focus on writers, *their* practices, and their particular social formations is by no means a threat to our field, but an opportunity to develop a more fine-grained and historically plausible understanding of the process by which writings about Jesus were composed, shared, and contributed to the growth and eventual cohesion of a movement. As a scholar, the approach that I am advocating is not allied consciously to any present social, political, or religious objective other than a desire to better understand the dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean world. I am, however, conscious of my desire to identify and, if possible, continue to rectify any approaches and methods that have traded on the “sacred” authority of the gospels in order to advance particular religious, political, nationalistic, racist, or anti-Semitic viewpoints. In this respect, this book represents a search for origins, but the origins of our scholarly practices and their legacies. Situated as I am within a scholarly genealogy only two or three generations removed from the likes of Gunkel, Johannes Weiss, and Martin Heidegger, I am struck by the fact that we still have much work to do in reflecting on the fraught history of our field, its influences, and its influencers. I hope this monograph contributes to that work as we in the secular academy continue to strive for good science and weak theology.

Acknowledgments

In the years since I began this project, I have watched seas rise and nations fall, which is to say, it has taken me a long time. I earned my doctorate. I married my clever and loving husband, Jaswinder Bolina (and, I might add, watched him complete three books in the time it took me to write one). I gave birth to our son Taran, who is even more delightful and mischievous than I could have hoped. We said goodbye to our beloved Sarah. I moved more times than I'd like to count. I strengthened old friendships and made cherished new ones.

This project began as my PhD dissertation at Brown University under the direction of Stanley Stowers. Without Stan's intellectual generosity this book simply wouldn't exist. His influence on my thinking is evident throughout. I humbly attribute any insights here to his mentorship while maintaining that any missteps or errors are entirely my own – I am embarrassed to admit how many times he had to walk me through Bourdieu's autonomous and heteronomous poles. Stowers' brilliance and collegiality set a standard in my experience of the field, and I am fortunate to call him my Doktorvater and friend.

David Konstan served on my dissertation committee, and he and his partner, Pura Nieto Hernandez, remain very dear to me. Compassionate and unfailingly reliable, they are the sort of friends I can always call, even if it's just for help finding the right ancient reference. I admire their wisdom, energy, and drive, but, most of all, I admire their kindness.

Nancy Evans looked past my faults as an impetuous and overconfident undergraduate advisee. She helped cultivate my curiosity in the ancient world and all things Greek, and she absolutely insisted that I learn *koinē*

to study the New Testament. She has shaped my life, and she remains my greatest mentor, colleague, and dear friend.

Thank you to the “Lady Cabal” – Jennifer Eyl, Erin Roberts, and Sarah Rollens – who are my daily lifeline on all things, from obscure philological questions to the latest memes. Your insights and humor are a treasure.

To my colleagues from Harvard Divinity School, Brown University, the University of Miami, and elsewhere, you are never far from my mind. I am thankful for your friendship, advice, and conversation.

To those who helped with the content of this book directly or through example, I am truly grateful: David Berger, Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, Cavan Concannon, Chris Keith, Ross Kraemer, Gretel Rodríguez, and Stephen Young. Academia would be a lonely place without you. Anna Cwikla and Nicola Hellmann-McFarland generously edited my Fraktur transcriptions and translations. And my deepest gratitude to Beatrice Rehl, the staff at Cambridge University Press, and my anonymous readers for their guidance and critical feedback. Each of you helped make this a better book.

A number of institutions have supported me and this project over the years. The University of Miami generously provided time and funding for research and travel. I was fortunate to enjoy several stays at Fondation Hardt in Vandœuvres, Switzerland, and I am indebted to the staff and my colleagues there and I am honored to call many of you friends. A particular thank you to Gary Vachicouras and Pierre Ducrey, who welcomed an interloping New Testament scholar in among the classicists.

I appreciate the revolving members of the Redescribing Christian Origins group, especially Barry Crawford and Merrill Miller, who have offered invaluable advice and encouragement.

Thank you to the Center for the Humanities and Antiquities Interdisciplinary Research Group at the University of Miami for many helpful discussions on various iterations of this book project; I am particularly grateful for the advice I received from colleagues Jennifer Ferriss-Hill, John Kirby, Frank Palmeri, Dabney Park, Jessica Rosenberg, and Mihoko Suzuki. And I greatly appreciate my colleagues in religious studies at the University of Miami who have helped make Miami my home. A special thank you to Bill Green, Henry Green, David Kling, Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado, Justin Ritzinger, and my many students for their guidance, compassion, and for keeping me on my toes.

Among our friends and family, thank you to Maria Almeida for bringing light to every day. Brittany Cruz, Mae Smith, Angie Waller-

Acknowledgments

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Guziewicz, and everyone at the Child Care Center made it possible for me to return to work; tireless, selfless, and hilarious, you also make me a better parent.

My love to our friends back in New England: Nancy Wager and the whole Wagner crew, the Doolittles, and Michael Bellofatto.

My love also to Kulwant and Ravinder Bolina for making me a part of your lives and your family, to Surinder and Sandie Bolina for answering our every call, and to the entire Bolina family in Chicago, Ann Arbor, Nashville, and elsewhere.

My husband has brought the unexpected into my life. I came to Miami contentedly on my own with no thought but for my work. Within days I met this affable, intelligent, and kind man who, within weeks, became my life partner. I confess I have no idea how you balance such creativity with unassailable logic, but I am the lucky beneficiary of your love and, crucially for the purposes of this book, your editorial eye. I have never been more filled with admiration and love for someone and I have never laughed harder.

To Taran: I don't know if or when you might read this. At this moment you are too young to recognize your own name. You wake at dawn. You pronounce bananas "my-na-nas." Your favorite word is an emphatic "more!" You destroy every puzzle. You knowingly smirk when we tell you "no." You are terrible for my work, but you make everything else feel unimportant. I adore you.

Finally, to my parents Thomas and Kathleen Walsh. You didn't bat an eye when I decided to become a religious studies major. I think I remember one conversation where you reminded me that Michael Crichton was a doctor *and* a writer, but that was about it. I had the enviable privilege of knowing that whatever school or career I entered, you would do anything it took to support me. You still do. You have sacrificed many of your own ambitions in order to give me every opportunity, and I can only hope to emulate your example. Any accomplishments in my life I attribute to you. For your generosity, I have enjoyed opportunities few are granted. I consider it my task to pay that forward now and always.

Abbreviations

References to ancient sources appear in both the footnotes and the body of the text, according to context. All ancient authors and works are abbreviated according to the conventions of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th ed.), unless otherwise noted. Journals and related sources are referenced in accordance with *L'Année philologique*. The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works, book collections, reference materials, and so forth.

- ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*
 CIL *Corpus inscriptionum latinorum* (volume and item number)
 DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Berlin, 1952.
 FHG *Fragmenta historicorum graecorum*, 5 vols. Ed. C. Müller and T. Müller. Paris, 1843–70.
 IG *Inscriptiones graecae*. Berlin, 1873–.
 LCL Loeb Classical Library
 OCD *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. Ed. S. Hornblower et al. Oxford, 2012.
 P. Oxy. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Egypt Exploration Society. London, 1912–.
 PI *The Philo Index: A Complete Greek Word Index to the Writings of Philo of Alexandria*. Ed. P. Borgen et al. Eerdmans; Brill, 2000.
 PMG *Poetae Melici Graeci*. Ed. D. L. Page. Oxford, 1962.
 SBL Society of Biblical Literature
 SEG *Supplementum epigraphicum graecum*, vols. 1–42. Amsterdam.

Note on the Text

All translations, both ancient and modern, are my own unless otherwise noted.

At times, I cite scholars within this monograph who have been accused of or charged with crimes and other serious offenses, or who have known ties to prejudiced organizations (e.g., the National Socialist Party in Germany). It is my strong preference not to offer these individuals professional acknowledgment given the nature of their actions and associations. That said, it would be intellectually misleading for me to omit entirely reference to certain works and persons, particularly as it pertains to my critique of German Romanticism and its legacies of anti-Semitism and racism. Therefore, I have endeavored only to cite such individuals when absolutely necessary to my argument and the conventions of the field.