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Margaret M. Mitchell

Paul and the Emergence of Christian Textuality

Early Christian Literary Culture in Context

Collected Essays
Volume I

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*To my teachers and my students
at the University of Chicago*

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The essays collected in this volume were published over a roughly 25 year span of time, and range in scope from the treatment of a two-word phrase (περὶ δέ) to the role of “the written record” in the formation, diffusion and ultimate success of the Gentile Christ-believing mission in the first three centuries. At the heart of these studies are two main claims: an insistence that it was by no means predictable that textuality would be a crucial medium of the Christ-believing apocalyptic missionary movements, and the contention that in a significant way it was the influence of the self-styled “apostolic envoy,” Paul, that made it so. This claim requires not only a retracing of the history and development of Paulinism, in some sense, but also an analysis, both hermeneutical and history-of-religions, of the role of texts in the life of the historical Paul, in the extant remnants of the historical-epistolary Paul (i. e., of the homologoumena), and in that of Paulinist readers, writers, collectors, redactors, narrators and interpreters from his time forward. This extends from the flexible poetics of his accordion-like “gospel narrative” that could be expanded and contracted to encompass and address with sophistication all kinds of issues in occasion-specific written texts, to the theological grounding of that gospel proclamation κατὰ τὰς γραφάς (1 Cor 15:3–4), to the religious logic of “envoyage” and “epiphany” that animated his self-understanding of the mediated presence of Jesus Christ crucified, to the powerful poetics of epistolary literature that enabled the absent Paul to speak from a distance and so even the dead Paul to continue to speak generation after generation in a trans-local and trans-temporal religious community formed in relation to these texts, their claims, and their ritual embodiments. The story of the development of an early Christian literary culture is not ancillary to a proper study of the “rise of Christianity” but is a key to it, the isolation of a major strand of its DNA and its processes for replication across time and space.

Paul’s letters are the oldest preserved “early Christian” texts, and likely were the oldest, since literary legacies of Paul’s contemporaries, such as Peter and James, were only written later, and in imitation of Paul, not only in genre and expected content, but in emulation of the precedent he set (as is mimicked also in the Acts of the Apostles, also under Pauline influence) that apostles should have been letter writers in the first place. The ironies here are considerable, since Paul wrote letters for multiple reasons, one of which was that through letters he was able to do things (or at least attempt to do things) that he could not do if present, most

especially because of how controversial a figure he was throughout his lifetime, both among those who knew him best, such as the Corinthians, and those who had only heard rumors about him, such as most of the Romans (beyond those he greets by name in Rom 16). It is an astounding and hardly expected outcome that Paul's letters' own forceful claims to his religious legitimacy as Christ's envoy par excellence – in the face of considerable (and not illogical) doubts – were in the long run successful in making and reinforcing that claim. And in turn they did more than that; they established that the Christ-movement was rooted in continual hermeneutical productivity and creativity, poised in tension between claims for continuity (such as *κατὰ τὰς γραφάς*) and expectation, and novelty, disruption, and divine surprises. The Christ-believing communities carried forward from these letters the expectation that “the gospel” was an inheritance and a hermeneutical puzzle that required ongoing debate, exposition and disputation, both in terms of the story about this story and in terms of the implications of this story for contemporary life, on both the individual and communal level (with impact on issues from food to marriage to associations with “outsiders,” to taxes to mourning customs to prayer for the emperor).

Each of the individual essays that follow contributes to these larger themes about early Christian literary culture, even as they also make tighter, more specific claims in different arenas of New Testament scholarship. But they are also interconnected pieces of this wider argument, as the many cross-references among the essays show. Let me highlight a few key points that run across several of the essays here and that together form the web of assumptions that emerge within my own reconstruction of the process of formation of an early Christian literary culture, beginning with, and emanating from, Paul:

1. The historical Paul understood himself to be as a one-man multi-media parade of Jesus Christ crucified.

2. Paul understood and presented “the gospel” (*τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*) as an episodic narrative of divine power centered on Jesus Christ crucified that could be incorporated linguistically (through forms of shorthand and longhand), ritually (in baptism, the Lord's meal, invocation of “the name”), socially (in the ecclesia as both local and trans-local reality), and ethically (in prescribed, forbidden, and recommended forms of behavior), and the role of his mission was to set in place those mechanisms of replication. This involves a “synecdochical logic” whereby a part implies the whole of the gospel narrative. This allows this flexible narrative to be crisply invoked and employed in a very wide range of contexts.

3. The mediation of presence and absence is crucial to Paulinism from its earliest stages forward; it is a literary-epistolary topos, a political-diplomatic one (in relation to envoyage, both Paul's claim to be an apostle of Jesus Christ and his own use of envoys such as Timothy and Titus), and a religious one (about where and how the divine is to be accessed). Altogether, it will constitute an early Christian “epiphanic economy.”

4. The “epiphanic logic” of Pauline mediated presence of Jesus Christ crucified was carried on by the the evangelist Mark, who was influenced by Paul not only in his emphasis on the cross, but in his theological poetics about the episodic narrative of the crucified

and raised Messiah as enshrined in his work, “a literary icon of Jesus Christ crucified,” that does what Paul did in re-presenting the death of Christ, as present in text, not tomb.

5. Paul’s letters (i. e., the historical-epistolary Paul) reflect self-conscious, deliberate and ambitious literary composition attuned to εὑρεσις (discovery of the point to be adjudicated and the best means of proving it), τάξις (arrangement of arguments, following different principles of organization, including topical, logical, chronological), and λέξις (style, as appropriate to subject matter, speaker and listeners).

6. Pauline interpretation began with Paul himself, as in the act of composition he directed the proper interpretation of his words, and then it was carried further when he responded to immediate and ongoing interpretations of his letters by his recipients.

7. Paul’s letters never did have and still do not have one single unambiguous meaning; epistolary meaning is not set in stone nor is it unchanging, but it is negotiated between authors, readers, communities and circumstances, including those well after the death of the author.

8. Paul’s letters insist that meaning is not capricious or arbitrary; they urge the readers to engage in the process of negotiated meaning that includes them as readers, and, sometimes, as texts.

9. The Pauline pseudepigrapha continue the process of Pauline self-interpretation begun in the letters, and engage in “corrective composition” to counter some readings of the homologoumena their authors sought to refute, and to reinforce others by emphasis and underscoring. In attempting to “fix” the meaning of Paul’s letters (in both senses of the term), they open up new questions for interpretive industry.

10. Much Pauline interpretation, via corrective composition or corrective exegesis, is dealing with the problem of inconsistency within the Pauline letters themselves, and between them and the Acts of the Apostles (this includes the Letter of James); this provides both problems to be solved, and a fount of resources for solving them by “playing Paul against Paul,” sometimes by insisting on one position, in other cases by conciliation.

11. The process of “playing Paul against Paul” does not involve a simple dichotomy between “pro-Pauline” or “anti-Pauline” but a negotiation of Pauline possibilities; an insistence on this dichotomy in scholarship on the Letter of James, e. g., has obscured the degree to which that letter is an act of Pauline (and Paulinist, if we understand that term to mean one who presumes Paul’s authority in principle) interpretation.

12. Paul was a cultural chameleon with a purpose, who united in himself (though not always seamlessly), as a Hellenistic Jew, cultural competencies that allowed him to speak to a range of persons within the majority culture (i. e., “Gentile”) as found in predominantly urban centers in the Mediterranean; as such, the divide between “Jewish” or “Hellenistic” background or influence does not work for Paul himself, nor should it be presumed in scholarly research that seeks to understand him and his writings in their original contexts.

13. The emergence, complexity and continuous formation of a Christian literary culture is best appreciated when there is not a presumed division between “the New Testament” or “the New Testament period” and “early Christian literature,” or between the Pauline letters and Pauline interpretation or reception; these are best understood as part of a single process with key moments of enduring shaping amidst ongoing contention and controversy.

These thirteen propositions are a scaffolding upon which one can locate and explore the development of early Christian literary culture. It is not a necessary consequent of the present argument that Paul was the sole influence on the development of that culture. In fact, there are many factors, such as the Septuagint,

oral traditions from and about Jesus of Nazareth, the varied developments of ritual practices, local particular histories and constructed identities of major urban centers that claim distinctive roles in the formation of the movements (Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessaloniki, Corinth, Rome, etc.). But as Paul's letters and memories of Paul's work and thought become prominent into the second and third generations (as seen in the gospel narratives and Acts, in the Pauline pseudepigrapha, in 1 Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp) a trans-Mediterranean network develops that depends in essential ways on these media forms and the religious logic that animates them that were inaugurated by Paul, as well as the person of Paul himself, who represented a respected yet controversial, insistent but not uniform legacy to be grappled with. Ignatius is especially important in this respect since, according to the traditional dating, he allows us to see the ambit of Pauline influence from Syria, into Asia (coastal and inland) to Rome by the reign of Trajan, as well as to appreciate how a new-generation Paulinist and leader takes Paul as his model in epistolography, in poetics, in ritual, in ecclesial forms, in political interaction, in theology, in Christ-mysticism, in ethics and in polemics. While Paul may not be the only force in the force-field of early Christian literary culture, it is literally inconceivable without him and the cyclone of effects he set in motion, already in his own life, and with repercussions down to the present day.

Permissions

The fifteen essays are presented here in the form in which they were originally published, with just a few errors (silently) corrected. I have resisted the temptation to rewrite or reformulate, or completely harmonize, even as one can trace some development in my thinking over time on some points. The original place of publication of each essay is also given in a footnote on the first page of each, and the original pagination is included in brackets, though these are now the versions of record of each of these essays. I would like to thank each of the original publishers for their kind permission to reprint these pieces in the present volume.

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ments of the Letter of James, Library of New Testament Studies 342 (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 75–98.

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The labor of producing this manuscript and seeing the volume through production was borne by my former student, Dr. R. Matthew Calhoun, and he has done a fantastic job, with commendable, even awesome, ἀκρίβεια. I am tremendously grateful.

The notes to various essays show just some of my scholarly conversation partners, and I thank them all once again. I hope that the re-publication of these essays in a collection may clarify and highlight some lines of thought, and continue to stimulate good dialogue and debate, and further advances in research in and across our disciplines and sub-specializations in the study of New Testament and early Christian literature, history, and thought.

As always, I am inexpressibly grateful to my family, Rick and Nora and Katie, for all they mean to me. Tracking the course of time over which these essays were written is also in some sense to relive some of our family history. The first article was published years before both girls were born, some were delivered first at conference talks away from home and from them, and the latest as they were first discovering in high school and middle school some of the intellectual adventures that are now carrying them beyond college. And Rick remains my best editor and conversation partner. How lucky is the scholar who enjoys both the solitude of study and the joyous noise of living companionship!

Each of the essays republished here has arisen from the lively interaction in the classroom that has been my home now for over 35 years. And so it is only right that I dedicate this book to my teachers and my students at the University of Chicago. Among my teachers, pride of place of course goes to Hans Dieter Betz, as well as to Elizabeth Asmis, Jon Levenson (now of Harvard Divinity School), Gösta Ahlström, and Robert M. Grant. I am sure their influence on my thinking is evident on every page that I have written. I also have had the honor and privilege to teach students (master's and doctoral students, as well as undergraduates) who are tremendously dedicated, smart, skilled, creative, collegial, and just plain fun to be around. I thank all of them for the joy of study together, and for all that I have learned in their company. Here I can only include my doctoral advisees for mention (hoping I have included them all!): Scott Bowie, Laurie Brink, Matt Calhoun, Brandon Cline, James Covington, Aaron Curtis, Tish Duncan, Matthijs den Dulk, Cameron Ferguson, Allison Gray, Nathan Hardy, Kelly Holob, Annette Huizenga, Jeff Jay, Andrew Langford, Jonathan Soyars, Janet Spittler, Trevor Thompson, Christine Trotter, and Richard Zaleski. I thank them, and all the students I have had the pleasure to teach, for their intellectual companionship in pursuing the enigmatic and unendingly fascinating questions about earliest Christianity.

Margaret M. Mitchell

Chicago, February 26, 2017

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations of journals, series titles, and standard reference works generally conform to the lists in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	David Noel Freedman, ed., <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ACCS/NT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Series
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANF	Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to 325</i> , 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980–83)
ANRW	Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, eds., <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–)
APF	<i>Archiv für Papyrusforschung</i>
BAGD	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature</i> , 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
BBET	Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie
BDAG	Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BEvT	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
BGU	<i>Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden</i> , 15 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895–1937)
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BRS	Biblical Resource Series
BSGRT	Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
Budé	Collection des universités de France, publiée sous le patronage de l'Association Guillaume Budé
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CNT	Commentaire du Nouveau Testament
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum

ÉBib	Études bibliques
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ECF	Early Church Fathers
EDNT	Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., <i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET	English translation
ETS	Erfurter theologische Studien
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
FF	Foundations and Facets
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
GT	German translation
GTA	Göttinger theologischer Arbeiten
HCS	Hellenistic Culture and Society
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HThKNT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IGLS</i>	Louis Jalabert, et al., eds., <i>Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie</i> (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1929–)
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAARSup	Supplements to Journal of the American Academy of Religion
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JJP</i>	<i>Journal of Juristic Papyrology</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
Lindemann/ Paulsen	Andreas Lindemann and Henning Paulsen, eds. and trans., <i>Die apostolischen Väter: Griechisch-deutsche Parallelausgabe</i> (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1992)
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th ed. with rev. suppl. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)
<i>LTP</i>	<i>Laval théologique et philosophique</i>
MM	James H. Moulton and George Milligan, <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930); repr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997)
NA ²⁷	Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 27th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993)

NA ²⁸	Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012)
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF ^{1/2}	Philip Schaff, et al., eds., <i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969–75), series 1 or series 2
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NRTh</i>	<i>La nouvelle revue théologique</i>
NTAbh	Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen
<i>NTApoc</i>	Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., <i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> , trans. Robert McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Clarke; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003)
NTL	New Testament Library
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
<i>OTP</i>	James H. Charlesworth, ed., <i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> , 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983–85)
PG	Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca</i> , 162 vols. (Paris, 1857–86)
<i>PGL</i>	Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, ed., <i>Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961)
PhA	Philosophia Antiqua
PL	Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina</i> , 217 vols. (Paris, 1844–64)
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
PW	Georg Wissowa and Wilhelm Kroll, eds., <i>Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , 50 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler & Druckenmüller, 1894–1980)
PWSup	Supplement to PW
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RGG</i> ³	Kurt Galling, et al., eds., <i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 3rd ed., 7 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1957–65)
<i>RGG</i> ⁴	Hans Dieter Betz, et al., eds., <i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 4th ed., 8 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998–2007)
<i>RPP</i>	Hans Dieter Betz, et al., eds., <i>Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion</i> , 14 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2007–13)
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SB	Friedrich Preisigke, et al., eds., <i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten</i> , 21 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1915–2002)
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SBLSymp	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SHAW	Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse

SHR	Studies in the History of Religion (supplements to <i>Numen</i>)
SIG	Wilhelm Dittenberger, ed., <i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecorum</i> , 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–24)
Smyth	Herbert Weir Smyth, <i>Greek Grammar</i> , rev. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956)
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
<i>StPatr</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>SVF</i>	Hans Friedrich August von Arnim, ed., <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> , 4 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–24)
<i>TDNT</i>	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
TLG	Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, stephanus.tlg.uci.edu
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TS	Texts and Studies
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
<i>TWNT</i>	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., <i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i> , 10 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932–79)
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
Zen.-P.	Zenon Papyri
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Chapter 1

The Emergence of the Written Record

1. A Battle of Literatures

The oldest Christian text in Latin contains the following interrogation of a North African Christian: “Saturninus the proconsul said, ‘what are those things in your case?’ Speratus replied, ‘books and letters of Paul, a just man.’”¹ Although it is uncertain whether these “books and letters of Paul” were produced by the defendant Speratus as evidence (and, if so, whether voluntarily or on judicial order), or brought along for the instruction and consolation of the prisoners, this encounter highlights the crucial link between Christian identity and Christian texts. In February 303, Diocletian waged a persecutorial campaign against the Christian movement by legislating three strategic actions. Tellingly, the second of these – the handing over and public burning of its texts² – was deemed by the emperor as crucial to the demolition of this cult as the razing of churches and civil disenfranchisement of its leaders. His diagnosis was apparently shared by his persecutorial successor, Maximinus Daia, who countered the threat of the Christian scriptures by the composition and enforced propagandization of a counter-literature, the “Memoirs of Pilate and the Savior” that were to be handed on to schoolchildren for memorization.³ The early fourth-century bibliographic broadsides were not to prove successful (indeed, to the distress of historians no single copy remains of the “Memoirs of Pilate and the Savior”). Eusebius found the ultimate victory of the Christian literature in the emperor Constantine’s celebratory commissioning of fifty resplendent copies of the scriptures (Old and New Testament) for distribution and use in and around the newly founded capital of his now-Christian empire.⁴ |

This dramatic “bibliomachy” arising in the late third and early fourth centuries⁵ signifies an essential fact about early Christianity: it was a religious move-

¹ *Mart. Scil.* 12 (events ca. 180 CE).

² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.2.4.

³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 9.5.1; also 1.9.3; 9.7.1.

⁴ *Vit. Const.* 3.1.5 (cf. 4.36.2–4).

⁵ On the “battle of literatures” between Homeric and Hesiodic epic and the Bible of the Christians, see Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57.

ment with texts at its very heart and soul, in its background and foreground. Its communities were characterized by a pervading, even obsessive preoccupation with and *habitus* for sacred literature. In the pre-Constantinian period, Christians succeeded in composing, collecting, distributing, interpreting and intimately incorporating a body of texts they found evocative enough to wish to live inside of.⁶ But how did a movement whose founder's only recorded act of writing was a short-lived and unread finger etching on wind-swept soil,⁷ within a century create, and in turn depend for its life upon, a vibrant literary culture?⁸

2. Earliest Christian Traditions and "Scripture"

The pivotal figure in this development toward textual traditions was Paul, the earliest Christian author we know by name.⁹ But Paul himself already stood within and contemporaneous to some existing Christian literary traditions. The shorthand version of the *euangelion*,¹⁰ "gospel message," Paul recounts in 1 Cor 15:3–4 (and says he has himself received) is that "Christ died on behalf of our sins *according to the writings*," and "he has been raised on the third day *according to the writings*." The earliest gospel message had texts in it, texts as central to it – in this case the holy scriptures of Israel. The first followers of Jesus of Nazareth had turned to their "scriptures," the sacred texts of Judaism in the Hebrew and Greek languages, and sought to explain the Jesus whom they had come to know by what they found there. Paul could only have confidently summarized the message that these things were "according to the scriptures" if he were certain his audience were already familiar with the key supporting texts.¹¹ Because of this, and on the basis of well-attested parallels in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literary culture, one of the earliest forms of early Christian literature was probably the "testimonia collection" | comprised of a list of passages culled from the scriptures that Christians took to be references to Jesus – his life, his actions (especially miracles),

⁶ "There was something about the Christian experience that drove [people] to record it in books, to express it, defend it, and explain it" (Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Robert M. Grant, rev. ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966], vi).

⁷ John 7:53–8:11 (fittingly, recounted in a textually uncertain passage!).

⁸ Later Christian authors will retroject authorial status onto Jesus (see Tjitze Baarda, "De *Christi scriptis*: Jesus as Author in Early Christian Literature," SNT's presidential address, August 1, 2001).

⁹ Note that Paul is the only one named by Speratus in our opening epigram.

¹⁰ See Margaret M. Mitchell, "Rhetorical Shorthand in Pauline Argumentation: The Functions of 'The Gospel' in the Corinthian Correspondence," in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, JSNTSup 108 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 63–88 [see ch. 7 below].

¹¹ E. g., Isa 53:5–6; Hos 6:2; Jonah 2:1.

death and remarkable resurrection.¹² Hence the first element in the establishment of the Christian “written record” was the singularly most significant decision – initially through the reflexive retention of the unquestioned literary authority of the word of God by faithful Jews, and later as a conscious step in literary appropriation by Gentiles who had previously laid no claim to these texts¹³ – to carry out Christian literary activity under the umbrella of the Torah, the prophets and the writings (see e.g. Luke 24:44). Early Christian literary culture was initially, and, with only few exceptions,¹⁴ carried out within the lexical field, plot structure, cast of characters, world-view and theological presuppositions of the scriptures of Israel, predominantly as known in the Greek translation called the Septuagint.

And it was centered on Jesus of Nazareth. In the interval between the death of Jesus (ca. 30 CE) and the composition of the first gospel (Mark, around 70 CE), the sayings of Jesus, like those of other holy men and philosophers, were remembered, rendered into Greek, retold, revised and recast in such common forms as *chreiai* (also termed aphorisms, pronouncement stories, and *apophthegmata*), parables, *logia* (sayings), *apokalypseis* (revelations), prophecies, macarisms and woes and *gnomai* (maxims).¹⁵ A similar process took place with narratives about Jesus, including stories of controversy with his contemporaries (now told in the light of the early church’s own contentious encounters with its neighbors) and accounts of miracle working. Gradually this process led to the collection of material, sometimes by generic type (such as parables of the kingdom,¹⁶ cultic teachings,¹⁷ church order instructions,¹⁸ wisdom sayings,¹⁹ miracles stories²⁰), at other times in larger blocks of material by catchword or topical/thematic link. Elsewhere, the ordering rationale is not apparent at all, as in the Gospel of

¹² See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 24–28, 65.

¹³ See e.g. 1 Cor 10:1 (“our ancestors”); Galatians 3–4 and Romans 4 (Abraham, “our forefather”).

¹⁴ See Harry Y. Gamble, “Marcion and the ‘Canon,’” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume 1, Origins to Constantine*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, asst. ed. K. Scott Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195–213.

¹⁵ Klaus Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament,” *ANRW* II.25.2:1031–1432; David E. Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 187–90.

¹⁶ Mark 4 and parallels.

¹⁷ See Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L. L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1–16, 55–69, and idem, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995), on Matt 6:1–18 as a “cultic didache.”

¹⁸ Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International; London: SCM, 1990), 53–54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55–62.

²⁰ Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, ed. John K. Riches, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Paul J. Achtemeier, “The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 198–221.

Thomas, a text which some scholars consider to be an early witness to Jesus's sayings largely independent of the canonical gospels, though others consider it later and derivative.²¹ The reconstructed | sayings document which has generated the most intensive investigation – and dispute – is Q, “the Synoptic sayings source,” indicated by the extensive parallelism between Matthew and Luke in places where they are clearly not relying upon their other common source, the gospel according to Mark.²² Perhaps kept in notebooks,²³ these were “working documents,” practical texts that played a vital role in the communities where they were composed, collected, read and, as this literary process vividly demonstrates, pondered, revised and retold.²⁴

3. The Early Turn to Writing

Traditions about Jesus, such as that of the “Lord’s meal” (1 Cor 11:23–26; Mark 14:22–25 and parallels) existed in both oral and written form for some time.²⁵ But we should not presume Christians universally preferred the oral to the written, considering the former more authoritative.²⁶ The burgeoning of Christian literature in this same period suggests the opposite – that the written word was *highly prized* among Christ-believers, a customary and trusted medium for communicating the truths, values, roots, promises and expectations of this religious movement. Above all, the two media were not necessarily viewed as competitive, but were linked in a developing culture of composition and consumption of “Jesus

²¹ Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 75–128, esp. 81; Aune, *Westminster Dictionary*, 465–73 (with further literature).

²² See Christopher M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 128–71.

²³ Graham Stanton, “The Early Reception of Matthew’s Gospel: New Evidence from Papyri?” in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson*, S. J., ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 42–61, 59.

²⁴ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 39, 77–78, on Christian texts as “practical.” But this should not be set in opposition to “aesthetic” values, which are likewise manifest in the careful literary artistry of much early Christian literature.

²⁵ Helmut Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern*, TU 65.5/10 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957).

²⁶ The Papias tradition in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3–4 has traditionally been taken this way (as recently James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 173–254), but see the apt criticisms of Loveday Alexander, “The Living Voice: Skepticism towards the Written Word in Early Christian and Graeco-Roman Texts,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, JSOTSup 87 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 221–47; and Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 30–31. For Paul’s strategic decision to write instead of speak in person, see Margaret M. Mitchell, “New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 641–62 [see ch. 6 below].

lore” that took place within the fluidity of ancient verbal culture in which “oral” and “written” were far less fixed than in the modern world and where reading was vocalized out loud. Full appreciation of this point requires, furthermore, that we not look for a single motivation or incitement for Christians suddenly and reluctantly to have “switched” from oral to literary activity. This “transition” is normally attributed to the passing on of the first generation and the fear that, with the death of the original eyewitnesses, important “testimony” may be lost. Although this did sometimes play a role (see, for instance, John 19:35; 21:20–24), there were a host of factors that prompted early Christian literary activity: |

- the model of the Septuagint as “sacred text”;
- the reading and interpretation of scripture in worship in the synagogue, which served as a prototype of Christian practice;²⁷
- the geographical spread of missionary communities needing to stay in contact;
- challenges from outsiders (Gentiles and Jews), which necessitated an organized and coherent response;
- the rapidity with which internal community debates about praxis and belief arose, requiring adjudication and instigating attempts at uniformity and universality through writing and rewriting texts;
- the increasing complexity of the hermeneutical tasks of self-definition and theological expression required for this religious movement delicately – and oddly – poised at the axis of Jewish and Greco-Roman religious precedents; and, not to be neglected:
 - the conspicuous literary skills of some key leaders in the first generations who made texts an effective vehicle for subsequent Christian discourse.

For all these reasons, from very early on texts became a natural and attractive medium for the religious circles developing around the name of Jesus. The emergence of the written record was neither reluctant nor hesitant, but enthusiastic.

4. *The Letters of Paul*

The world in which Paul wrote to assemblies (*ekklēsiai*) he had founded in Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth and those ahead in territory he hoped soon to visit (Rome)²⁸ was quite accustomed to letters as a means of communication. A wealth of ancient Greek documentary letters written on papyrus has been preserved in Egypt which give us insight into everyday epistolary practice

²⁷ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 208–14.

²⁸ See Margaret M. Mitchell, “Gentile Christianity,” in eadem and Young, *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 103–24 [see ch. 2 below].

in the early Roman empire.²⁹ We also have the published “literary letters” of such classical giants as Plato, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Epicurus, Cicero and Seneca, as well as later epistolary handbooks.³⁰ The extant letters Paul sent to early Christian churches are situated in between those two epistolary levels: they contain many of the same literary conventions as the | simple everyday family and business letters (e.g. epistolary prescripts, health wishes, disclosure formulae, greetings, farewells), and they are real letters written to known and directly addressed readers.³¹ But their epistolary bodies (i.e. the center of the letter where its main business is accomplished) are far more elaborate, including complex and highly developed arguments which are much closer to the literary letters of the orators and philosophers (and Hellenistic Jewish authors, like the writer of the “Letter of Aristeas”), resembling a speech or a treatise more than the simple missives found among the papyri.³² Paul’s letters employ not only the epistolary *topoi* (“commonplaces” or “clichés”) of the documentary letters, but also rhetorical forms and techniques such as *hypotheseis* (“propositions”), syllogisms, *paradeigmata* (“examples for emulation”), *synkriseis* (“comparisons”), allegories and *elenchoi* (“refutations”).³³ The letter was a flexible vehicle by which one could perform a range of functions: advising, instructing, admonishing, defending, excoriating, informing, consoling, administering, requesting, explaining and warning.³⁴ In key instances Paul decided to write letters to address issues because they were more effective than his own voice and personal presence.³⁵ Remarkable products of a skilled thinker and memorable personality, the Pauline letters wrestle with the theological, ethical and pastoral meaning of the oral gospel proclamation for the subsequent history of each small group of Christians (members of local house churches) in a given city or region,³⁶ seen in the light of God’s scriptural plan for humanity.³⁷

The epistles of Paul, “the apostle of Jesus Christ,” were not written to evangelize the faith to outsiders; they presume basic knowledge of the gospel narrative, its

²⁹ John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, FF (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

³⁰ Abraham J. Malherbe, ed. and trans., *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, SBLBS 19 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

³¹ See Hans-Josef Klauck, *Die antike Briefliteratur und das Neue Testament*, UTB 2022 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998); David E. Aune, *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, SBLBS 21 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 158–225.

³² Closest to those among Paul’s letters is Philemon.

³³ Treatments in J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

³⁴ Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 5 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

³⁵ Mitchell, “New Testament Envoys” [see ch. 6 below].

³⁶ For detailed discussion, see Mitchell, “Gentile Christianity” [see ch. 2 below].

³⁷ On Paul’s use of scripture, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), and Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, BHT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986).

chief characters (i. e. Jesus, God [= the God of the Jews/Israelites], the spirit, the “rulers of this age”) and essential episodes. As second- or third-order reflections on his oral “gospel,”³⁸ they enforce and participate in a religious world-view that Paul did much to create, and, most importantly, they script essential roles and identities for their addressees – “the brothers and sisters,” “those who are being saved,” “the called ones,” “those who believe,”³⁹ within the narrative of salvation so vividly sketched. This argumentative strategy allowed for an easy and natural transference of identity from the original recipients to | later generations who would read and ponder these letters and find them formative of Christian identity for them, as well.⁴⁰ But Paul’s letters are difficult texts, as the author of 2 Peter later lamented, even as he testifies (sometime in the early second century) that these documents have already become *graphai*, “scripture” (3:15–16).

5. *Pauline Pseudepigrapha and the Pauline Letter Collection*

In addition to providing fruits and nettles for this process of theological reflection, Paul’s letters exemplify interpretive procedures and standards for the future. The task of Pauline interpretation that was in many ways to dominate the history of Christian thought began already in his lifetime, as he negotiated with Corinthian (e. g. 2 Cor 2:3–9; 7:11–13; 10:7–10) and other readers about the meaning and intent of his letters.⁴¹ Because one mode of steering the meaning of those contested texts was for Paul to write a new text supplanting or building upon an earlier one,⁴² after Paul’s death the practice was continued by others,⁴³ who picked up a stylus and sent messages “via letter[s] as though they were from him” (2 Thess 2:2). As Paul could be present from a distance across the empire, so also could he be present even after his death in letters (either his own or pseud-epigraphical ones).⁴⁴ There is not complete scholarly agreement on which letters

³⁸ Mitchell, “Rhetorical Shorthand” [see ch. 7 below].

³⁹ E. g., 1 Cor 1:1–24.

⁴⁰ See Nils A. Dahl, “The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church,” in idem, *Studies in Ephesians: Introductory Questions, Text- and Edition-Critical Issues, Interpretation of Texts and Themes*, ed. David Hellholm, Vemund Blomkvist and Tord Fornberg, WUNT 131 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 165–78.

⁴¹ Margaret M. Mitchell, “The Corinthian Correspondence and the Birth of Pauline Hermeneutics,” in *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict, Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall*, ed. Trevor J. Burke and J. Keith Elliott, NovTSup 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17–53 [see ch. 9 below].

⁴² The clearest example is 1 Cor 5:9–10, but the entire Corinthian correspondence illustrates this (Mitchell, “Corinthian Correspondence” [see ch. 9 below]).

⁴³ Perhaps initially members of his missionary team (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 99).

⁴⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, “Paul’s ‘Second Presence’ in Colossians,” in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts, Essays in Honor of Lars Hartmann*, ed. Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm, asst. ed. Christer D. Hellholm (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 507–18.

were actually written by Paul and which by these later “Pauls,” but the strongest consensus judges Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians to be “deutero-Paulines,” and the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, late first or early second century) “trito-Paulines.” Such conclusions are based upon interlocking comparisons of historical, theological, linguistic and literary features with the presumed “genuine” Pauline letters.⁴⁵

For example, while Paul wrote to Christians in Thessalonica ca. 50 CE to respond to the theological crisis provoked by the delay of the *eschaton*, a later admiring reader of that letter composed a sequel using it as a literary template (replicating even oddities of its epistolary structure) to address virtually the inverse eschatological crisis: the fear that the *eschaton* had already arrived (2 Thess 2:2). This literary strategy would only work if Paul’s letters were | already known to be authoritative teachings (see 2 Thess 2:15; 3:14), and the readers of this new text already preconditioned to read “as though they were Thessalonians” and hence to reap the benefit of advice (purportedly) sent to the early Macedonian Christians. This process of universalizing the readership of Paul’s letters was exemplified in the same period by the composition of the “circular letter” of Ephesians, which in its earliest copies did not actually name the Ephesians in the prescript, but “the saints and believers in Christ Jesus” in any place,⁴⁶ who would find in this imaginative compendium of statements of Paul’s original letters⁴⁷ a spiritualized *enchiridion* (“handbook”) of Pauline theology and ethics for their own generation.

The pseudepigraphical Pauline letters depend and draw upon the original letters and “update” and refine them to suit later circumstances. Consequently, they presume that Paul’s letters had already been collected in some form, and were in circulation as authoritative documents. We do not know exactly when this was done, or by whom, but already by the time of 1 Clement (end of first century?) and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 117 CE?) they are known and quoted. The earliest was probably the collection of letters to seven churches, with that number promoting a universalist audience of the epistles, a hermeneutical strategy so immediately successful that in some sense it replaced itself as more letters to churches and individuals were added, and ten-, thirteen- and fourteen-letter collections were formed.⁴⁸ Each version gave a different interpretive shape to the

⁴⁵ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: de Gruyter, 1995–2000), 2:241–305; Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen, und die Apostolischen Väter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 58–251.

⁴⁶ Marcion’s text had Laodiceans in the prescript (Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.17; cf. Col 4:16).

⁴⁷ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 9, argues that 550 of the 618 short sense units of the letter have “unmistakable parallels in Paul, in words or substance.”

⁴⁸ Hermann J. Frede, “Die Ordnung der Paulusbriefe und der Platz des Kolosserbriefes im Corpus Paulinum,” in *Vetus Latina: Die Reste der allateinischen Bibel*, 24/2: *Epistulae ad Philip-*

collection, by means of editorial work within individual letters (such as 2 Corinthians, which is a compilation of five individual missives),⁴⁹ the number of letters included, and the order in which they were arranged. We know of collections with Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans at the head.⁵⁰ It is possible that this early epistolary anthology, and the need to move around easily from letter to letter, was the reason Christians favored the codex over the roll for their literary works.⁵¹ That physical format was to prove equally suitable for the other characteristic genre of early Christian literature,⁵² which was soon packaged and disseminated in sets, also. |

6. *Gospel Literature*

Paul's letters presume,⁵³ but do not themselves comprise, a narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Sometime around the conclusion to the Roman war on Judea (66–73 CE, with the catastrophic destruction of the temple in 70 CE), an anonymous Christian with a rustic prose style and flair for irony become the unwitting inaugurator of the gospel literature that was to become the telltale Christian literary product. From early times identified as Mark, the interpreter of Peter,⁵⁴ this writer, in penning the words of incipit, “the beginning of the ‘good news’ [= ‘gospel’] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1), said much more than he could ever know, for his text was to be the first in a line of early Christian “gospels,” each of which promotes a particular perspective on Jesus and his place in God’s plan of salvation.

6.1. *Mark*

Mark’s gospel is a compilation of traditions he inherited, especially miracle stories about Jesus, tales of controversy, a smaller body of Jesus’s teachings, and

penses et Colossenses, 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 290–303; Harry Y. Gamble, “The Pauline Corpus and the Early Christian Book,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 265–80, and idem, *Books and Readers*, 49–66. David Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), thinks Paul began the process with his own four-letter collection.

⁴⁹ Mitchell, “Corinthian Correspondence” [see ch. 9 below].

⁵⁰ See Frederic G. Kenyon, ed., *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible, Fasciculus III Supplement, Pauline Epistles, Plates* (London: Emery Walker, 1937), f. 21r, showing Hebrews following Romans in P^{46} (c. 200).

⁵¹ Gamble, “Pauline Corpus,” and idem, *Books and Readers*, 49–66.

⁵² T. C. Skeat argued the codex was adopted for the gospels (*The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat*, ed. J. Keith Elliott, NovTSup 113 [Leiden: Brill, 2004], 73–87).

⁵³ For instance, he places the Lord’s Supper “on the night on which he was betrayed” (1 Cor 11:23).

⁵⁴ Papias 2.15 (Lindemann/Pausen 294) = Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15.

perhaps an existing outline of the passion story. The juxtaposition of these units of tradition with his essentially Pauline conception of the “good news” – as the death and resurrection of Jesus into which believers are baptized to gain its saving effects⁵⁵ – left Mark with several logical and theological problems. He sought to resolve these in the course of his narrative, and in so doing produced a “diamond in the rough” of a text which for all its ruggedness is a captivating and ingenious piece of literature. The first problem is the cloaked and misunderstood identity of Jesus as the Messiah both in his lifetime and in Mark’s, and the second (related to it) was the incredible incongruity of a murdered miracle worker. A compilation of the familiar and the strange (in a world that knew other messiahs, other healers), Mark scripts an utter novelty: a verbal icon of the crucified king of Israel.

Mark’s revolutionary text is “biographic”⁵⁶ in that it follows the life of a central character (Jesus is in all but two or three scenes in the whole) in a roughly chronological order ending in his death. It opens with Isaiah the prophet (presumed to be known to the audience) whose voice interprets and | explains the action (1:2–3; 1:11; cf. Mal 3:1), so that the entire “beginning” of Mark is situated in relation to the “beginning” of Genesis and the anthology of biblical literature which it introduces.⁵⁷ Hence Mark’s “good news” is a new narrative that presents itself as a prophetic sequel to the scriptures of Israel⁵⁸ focused on the question, “Who is Jesus?” (Mark 8:27). His work is also a deliberate counter-reading to those of his contemporaries associated with the powers that handed Jesus over to be crucified (“elders, chief priests, scribes” [8:31]). They contest Jesus’s messianic identity (12:35–37), term it blasphemy (14:61–64) and mock his enthronement as king of Israel (15:31–32) at the very moment of his crucifixion in this upside-down drama. But the followers of Jesus⁵⁹ will triumph over those opponents (both Jesus’s and theirs) when he comes in power as the Son of Man and rescues them from this world (13:27). Readers of this text (which is much more complex than it seems on the surface) are put in a privileged position whereby they can view and learn from the ignorance, not only of Jesus’s cardboard cut-out evil opponents, but also his own disciples – Peter, James and John and the rest – who

⁵⁵ See Joel Marcus, “Mark – Interpreter of Paul,” *NTS* 46 (2000): 473–87, with bibliography on this long-standing issue of debate.

⁵⁶ Terminology of Simon Swain, “Biography and Biographic in the Literature of the Roman Empire,” in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. idem and M. J. Edwards (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 1–37. On the gospels as “biographies,” see David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 17–76; Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁵⁷ Cf. Mark 13:19; 10:6; John 1:1 will make this move definitively.

⁵⁸ Differently, Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), argues that Mark wrote using the *Odyssey* as his “hypotext”; critical assessment in Margaret M. Mitchell, “Homer in the New Testament?” *JR* 83 (2003): 244–60.

⁵⁹ “Following” is Mark’s technical term for being a disciple of Jesus (1:18; 2:14, 15; 6:1; 8:34; 9:38; 10:21, 28, 32, 52; 15:41).

grapple, grope, and often miss the epiphanies before their very eyes. Through the narrative scheme of the incomprehension of the disciples Mark has effected a massive theological transition from past history to “good news” – as found in his text! – as the repository of genuine and superior religious insight. This move (together with the ritual structures in evidence in the narrative) ensures that *readers of any generation* have a mode of access to Jesus that is not only equal, but superior, to that of the historical disciples.⁶⁰

6.2. Markan Revisions

If one takes seriously this epistemological claim of Mark’s gospel – that *the text* is a vehicle of divine epiphanies which were and are constantly misperceived on the level of history – then it is supremely important that the text get it right. Mark won the day on the larger point of textual mediation of divine realities, but also thereby directed attention to lacks, gaps and infelicities in his narrative that later authors sought to fill. Anonymous Christians took up that task, to revise Mark’s “beginning” composition to include more traditions about Jesus’s sayings, and to revise his theological vision for their own contexts. Because Matthew and Luke made Mark’s existing narrative the framework for their own, and copied much of it verbatim, these three gospels are called the | “Synoptics” (in honor of their “common view”). What is striking, actually, is the paradox of their strict, word-for-word fidelity to Mark’s account in some places, and quite free alteration of it elsewhere. There were likely multiple motivations for the editorial activity of each evangelist and variable factors affecting the final product in each case. According to ancient rhetorical culture (the curriculum of the ancient *paideia* or educational system), a discourse should be appropriate to the subject, the speaker and the audience, the three components of the communicative act. Hence, it should not be a surprise that each gospel is in certain and various ways tailored to its expected or intended audience. Ancient traditions going back to the early second century sought to recapture the moment and place of writing of each gospel. While often legendary, these traditions, assigning Matthew to Antioch or Judea, Luke to Achaia, Mark to Rome or Alexandria, were one way early readers grappled with the individuality and particularity of each gospel text,⁶¹ even as the gospels were soon to become widely disseminated.⁶² While we do not have to assume that each evangelist knew only a single house church or urban center, or

⁶⁰ The same claim that Paul makes for his own apostolate (see Margaret M. Mitchell, “Epiphanic Evolutions in Earliest Christianity,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 29 (2004): 183–204 [see ch. 12 below].

⁶¹ Details in Margaret M. Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim That ‘The Gospels Were Written for All Christians,’” *NTS* 51 (2005): 36–97.

⁶² All (except, significantly, Mark) well attested in the papyri from Egypt (see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 3rd ed. [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 247–56).

wrote for only a handful of friends, they do appear to address different concerns and concrete ecclesiastical contexts within the last decades of the first century.⁶³

Matthew. The author of Matthew's gospel appears to have lived in close proximity with non-Christian Jews and Gentile Christians sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Matt 22:7; 23:38–39). He found Mark's gospel worthy, but insufficient in its opening and closing, and too meager in its record of the teachings of Jesus. In editing Mark to form a new version, Matthew put a new angle on Mark's enigmatic suffering Messiah by rendering him as the new Moses, both through the addition of infancy narratives which recall Moses's imperiled birth and boyhood in Egypt, and through the incorporation of blocks of traditional teaching material from Q and from his own special material in five (possibly six) long discourses of Jesus.⁶⁴ Tellingly, Matthew is the only evangelist to use the word *ekklēsia*, "church."⁶⁵ His Jesus is the founder of a new community of obedience to his word and command (see especially | chapter 18), and, even beyond Moses, he is "Emmanuel," "God with us," from his miraculous conception, one who remains present in its midst (1:23; 28:20; 18:20; with Isa 7:14). This is just one of some dozen "formula quotations" in Matthew, in which he solemnly emphasizes that Jesus's deeds and life events are in fulfillment of "scripture." This sense that in the history of Jesus prophecy has been fulfilled is also applied to events since Jesus's death and its aftermath. Jesus is depicted as having foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, down to the detail of the conflagration which Titus's troops ignited (23:38; 22:7). Matthew interprets these events as divine punishment on the Jewish leaders and people for the death of Jesus (27:25) and willful rejection of the "gospel" message (28:11–15). When combined with the bitter invectives Matthew has Jesus deliver against the leaders of the synagogue (who were in this time period themselves seeking theological explanation for the terrible events, and finding it elsewhere),⁶⁶ Matthew's gospel became a charter document for the mission to the Gentiles, the *ethnos*, "nation," who will bear fruit (21:43; 28:19–20). Yet the parables Matthew adds to Mark's "little apocalypse" (Mark 13:1–37; cf. Matt 24:1–25:46), issue the unmistakable warning that the *parousia* of the Lord will only bring access to the kingdom of God for those whose deeds are in conformity with their word of confession to the Lord (see the parallelism between 7:21–27 and 25:31–46). Much is at stake, obviously, in composing a text which, like Torah itself, preserves and re-presents

⁶³ Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–48, has rightly urged scholars not to presume that the gospel communities were isolated or completely separate. However, his proposal that all four evangelists wrote for "any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman empire" (*ibid.*, 1) goes too far in the other direction.

⁶⁴ See the same formula in 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1; cf. 28:19–20.

⁶⁵ Matt 16:18; 18:17 (twice). Luke reserves the term for his second volume (Acts).

⁶⁶ See e.g. 4 Ezra.

“all that I commanded you” (28:20). Perhaps it is not surprising that Matthew’s was the most widely read and cited gospel in the earliest church.⁶⁷

Luke and Acts. Explicitly acknowledging his “many” unnamed predecessors (Mark and others), this writer, probably in the early second century, argues that his new “narrative” (*diēgēsis*) is justified by his wish to write in an orderly fashion (*kathexēs*, 1:3) the traditions, both oral and written, which he had followed “with great precision” (*akribōs*). Luke not only claims a place for his work on the growing shelf of early Christian literature, but he also by his use of the literary form of a historiographic preface,⁶⁸ with its customary references to witnesses, prior sources and “accuracy” and “reliability,” overtly seeks to situate his narrative about “the things that have been fulfilled among us” among the local histories of the ancient world.⁶⁹ The shift from a well-crafted Greek | rhetorical period (Luke 1:1–4) to the conspicuously Septuagintal diction of the birth narratives (as signaled immediately in 1:5) demonstrates the dual literary standards Luke emulates, and the companions he wishes his work to have. The hybrid that results is a drama of fulfillment of divine prophetic promises in three acts, which impelled Luke to sequelize, not just Mark, but his own work, and produce a second volume (*logos*, Acts 1:1) we now know as “The Acts of the Apostles.” In it Luke provided a foundation story for a unified Christian movement (a romantic vision which belies the primary evidence in Paul’s letters) that was completely faithful to its roots in Jerusalem and Judaism (1:8–9; 2:22–28; 24:44–47), yet, when spurned, turned to the Gentiles, who “will listen to it” (Acts 28:28; cf. 13:45–47). Written to a patron, Theophilus, Luke-Acts is the fullest piece of early apologetics, a defense of the legitimacy of the Christian movement as a religion rooted in a “righteous” founder, Jesus, who was no threat to Roman authority (as even the Roman governor who wrote the order for his execution averred three times),⁷⁰ and instigated a movement which has as its goal not political sedition, but universal religious salvation. The two-volume work shows the spread of the gospel from origins in Jerusalem and Jewish literary culture to Rome and a Gentile Christian audience (Luke 1:8–9; 2:22–38; Acts 28:30–31). Jesus and the movement he spawned are part of “world history,” set in relation to the Roman imperium (Luke 2:1; 3:1).

⁶⁷ Edouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, ed. Arthur J. Bellinzona, trans. Norman J. Belval and Suzanne Hecht, 3 vols., New Gospel Studies 5 (Leuven: Peeters; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990–93).

⁶⁸ See Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) (who seeks to isolate technical manuals from historiographic prefaces); essays in David P. Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke’s Narrative Claim upon Israel’s Legacy*, Luke the Interpreter of Israel (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) on Luke’s preface and its place in ancient historiography.

⁶⁹ Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography*, NovTSup 64 (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

⁷⁰ Luke 23:4, 14, 22; cf. Acts 18:15–16; 25:9–12.

John. Scholars dispute whether John's gospel is, like Matthew and Luke, a rewrite of Mark.⁷¹ This literary theologian trumps even the Matthean and Lukan attempts to push Mark's "beginning" back to Jesus's ancestry to Abraham (Matt 1:1–17) or Adam (Luke 3:23–37), to the primordial, prehistorical "beginning" before the creation of Gen 1:1. His famous prologue, a poetic rendering of the career of the *logos* ("the Word"), is cleverly poised to claim for Jesus divine praises from Hellenistic Judaism and Greek philosophy. The christological question that formed the center of Mark's narrative ("Who do people say that I am?")⁷² becomes in John an inquiry about origins and destinations – "Where is he from?" and "Where is he going?"⁷³ As in Mark the reader has been clued in to the answer from the prologue, but in the act of reading s/he is given the opportunity to "see" and "touch" textually the divine realities which will lead to belief, and true life (John 20:30–31; 1 John 1:1–4). Like Matthew, John combines narrative material with discourse, but in his case | the focus is not so much ethical as christological. Jesus in John is the divine "exegete" (1:18), who reveals God by disclosing his identity in predication (the frequent "I am" statements) and paradox,⁷⁴ chiefly his exaltation in the very moment of crucifixion, a literal "lifting up" from the earth (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34) which is a moment of oxymoronic glorification (John 1:14; 12:16, 23, 28; 17:5). But even the divine self-exegesis of the gospel text requires update and further interpretation. The gospel of John has several endings, added over time in new editions, which allow us to glimpse the subsequent fate of the witness who stands behind the work, the "Beloved Disciple" (see especially 21:20–25; cf. 19:35), and Peter (21:18–19), now martyred. The re-editions of the gospel are accompanied by at least one primer (perhaps written by one of the final editors?)⁷⁵ in how to read it right. First John repudiates those who have gone astray from the proper "beginning" and not understood that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2–3) in "water and blood" (1 John 5:6; cf. John 19:34). It is not hard to see how other readers, such as the Gnostic Heracleon, could find in this gospel's portrayal of Jesus's impassivity before death⁷⁶ ample grounds for the contrary view, even as the revelation discourses in John were to be a standard literary form among the books found at Nag Hammadi.⁷⁷

⁷¹ See Harold W. Attridge, "Johannine Christianity," in Mitchell and Young, *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 125–43. I tend to think John does know Mark.

⁷² Mark 8:27, 29; cf. 1:24; 4:41; 6:2–3, etc.

⁷³ John 7:27–28; 8:14; 9:29–30; 19:9, etc.

⁷⁴ On paradox as characteristic of Christian discourse, see Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70), 1:xxiv–xl.

⁷⁶ Compare John 12:27 and Mark 14:32–41.

⁷⁷ See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); 4th ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

7. The Fourfold Gospel

Gnostics, and other Christians, had more gospels than these four. When Origen seeks to explain Luke's reference to "many [who] have undertaken" to write (Luke 1:1), he names such works as "the gospel of the Egyptians" (elsewhere, also, "the gospel of the Hebrews"), "the gospel of the Twelve," "the gospel of Basilides," "the gospel of Thomas," and "the gospel of Matthias," among "many others."⁷⁸ The second century saw increasing debate about the status, authority and consistency among these various gospels. Several solutions were proposed: for a community of Christians to pick (and perhaps suitably edit)⁷⁹ one gospel that best reflects their views, to harmonize the gospels into a single composite narrative,⁸⁰ or deliberately to enshrine the diverse portraits into a | multivolume, but definitive, collection. The champion of the latter position, which was to prove decisive, was Irenaeus of Lyons, who provided a justification for the fourfold gospel (no more, no less) as rooted in the divine intention and cosmological order, just like the four winds or four pillars holding up the world.⁸¹ This is consistent with the titles "the gospel according to [Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John]."⁸²

8. A Bibliographic Culture

The earliest Christians did not just produce texts; they created a literary culture. Communities of readers who "searched the scriptures" individually and in common needed tools. They found their hermeneutical tools (methods for interpretation) by naturally carrying over the standard literary-critical techniques taught in the Greco-Roman educational system, whereby one learned to read with precision, to determine the authenticity of authorship of texts and to compile the most reliable readings and interpretations.⁸³ They also discovered within their texts precedents for reading their "scriptures," including enigmatic passages like Mark 4:10–12, Gal 4:24, and 1 Cor 10:11, which would function increasingly

⁷⁸ Origen, *Hom. in Lc.* 1.4–5. See Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*, trans. Brian McNeil (London: T & T Clark, 2003), and translated texts in *NTApoc*, vol. 1.

⁷⁹ See Gamble, "Marcion and the 'Canon,'" on Marcion's edition of Luke's gospel.

⁸⁰ Such as Tatian's "Diatessaron" (see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Syria and Mesopotamia," in Mitchell and Young, *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 351–65).

⁸¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8, as also the four beasts of Ezek 1:18; cf. Rev 4:6–7, the source of the traditional iconography of the evangelists (Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994]).

⁸² Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 64–84, argues for a first-century date for these, but this is debatable.

⁸³ Robert M. Grant, *Heresy and Criticism: The Search for Authenticity in Early Christian Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); Young, *Biblical Exegesis*; continued discussion in eadem, "Towards a Christian *Paideia*," in Mitchell and Young, *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 484–500.

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