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# The origins of early Christian literature: contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman literary culture

Robyn Faith Walsh, *The origins of early Christian literature: contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman literary culture*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 325. ISBN 9781108835305 \$99.99.

## Review by

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## Preview

Despite its broad title, this book is primarily about the so-called synoptic gospels—the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Walsh seeks to recontextualize these works by setting aside the common (“myopic” and “idiosyncratic”) interpretive model that views them chiefly as products of early Christian communities and as potential sources of information about such communities. Walsh attempts instead to “understand the gospels as ‘normal’ ancient literature produced by educated, elite members of Greco-Roman society” (13). The project is framed as “an approach to these writings and history that foregrounds concrete data without appealing to inherited assumptions” (15).

The first chapter describes and critiques a cluster of these assumptions, what Walsh calls the Big Bang theory of Christian origins: that followers of Jesus quickly increased in number while forming functional institutions and bounded communities. Texts such as the Acts of the Apostles portray early Christians in this way, and Walsh faults scholars for uncritically accepting and reinforcing this kind of narrative. Walsh advises shifting our attention away from the idealizations depicted *within* these texts and toward the process of producing this “invented tradition” of Christian origins: “The true origins of Christianity are in how its canonical texts were later collated, circulated, and established as authoritative, not in the mythic constructions we find described in the writings themselves” (34). In effect, Walsh charges, so-called critical scholarship has simply reproduced and tinkered with the myth of origins promulgated by Christians of the second century. In fact, the synoptic gospels should not be viewed (at least in the first instance) as *Christian* literature. It would be “conjecture” to say that the writers of the gospels “were associated in some measure with a group of persons either interested or actively participating in practices pertaining to the Jesus or Christ movement” (35).

The second and longest chapter locates the roots of these assumptions in the German romantic tradition, especially the work of Johann Gottfried Herder. Bringing to bear Bruce Lincoln’s genealogy of the concept of myth and Suzanne Marchand’s overview of German orientalism on the history of New Testament studies, Walsh demonstrates the ways in which conceptions of a “literature of the *Volk*” both presume the existence of stable group identities and occlude the much messier work through which *actual* social groups are formed and maintained. The idea of literature produced through the *Geist* of a *Volk* also makes possible an approach to textual analysis that focuses on “identifying various layers of a text in order

to argue for earlier and earlier historical strata” (73). Within such a framework, the role of “author” is reduced to a literate spokesperson, or compiler of received traditions, for an illiterate community (in studies of the gospels, “the Markan community,” “the Matthean community,” etc.). In this connection, Walsh also takes aim at Roland Barthes and others who have accepted the “Death of the Author,” arguing instead that ancient authors must be thought of as “rational agents” (87) who “self-consciously choose and craft their references and source materials in a rational way” (84).

The *habitus* of these ancient authors is the focus of the third chapter, which provides a survey of education and literary culture in the Roman world in order to portray the kind of social structures and conditions necessary for someone to author a text. Walsh notes that “acts such as publication were not the definitive undertakings they are in modernity,” but the thrust of the chapter is to stress again that “each text represents the interests, knowledge, and efforts of a rational agent” (126-127). Walsh also begins in this chapter to position the gospels in a particular literary milieu, namely the rise of what has been called “consumer literature” in the Roman empire, entertaining or edifying writing—novels, handbooks, abridgements, compendia—that could be read both by the highly educated and by less accomplished readers.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the fourth chapter, Walsh further recontextualizes the gospels in the contemporary Greek and Roman literary sphere by entering into conversation with Ilaria Ramelli and others who see close connections between the gospels and the *Satyricon* of Petronius and other ancient novels. Walsh concludes that “the gospels are engaged in the same discourses, imagery, and style of creative elaboration as their peers” who wrote novelistic literature (152). Walsh makes additional links between the gospels and books of wonders, such as that of Phlegon of Tralles, positioning the gospels in a literary stream that catered to interests in curiosities and unusual events, such as empty tombs. The chapter closes with reflections on the functions of anonymous literature and anonymous sources in the Roman world. For Walsh, references to sources (e.g., “eyewitnesses” in the preface to the Gospel according to Luke) represent literary *topoi*. Scholars have thus been misguided in searching for remnants of oral traditions in the gospels: “If the gospels [*sic*] writers are aware of any oral tradition about Jesus..., these elements are irretrievable to us, if they existed at all” (156).

The final chapter situates the gospels more specifically among examples of what Walsh describes as “subversive biographies,” ancient *bioi* that twist the conventions of more traditional “civic biographies” that celebrated dominant social values. The “subversive” group includes such titles as the *Life of Homer*, the *Life of Aesop*, and the *Alexander Romance*. These works depict colorful events in the lives of the protagonists, who demonstrate their cleverness in evading hostile interlocutors before coming to an untimely, or at least unfortunate, death. Drawing on these parallels, Walsh points out that “specific characteristics of Jesus’ portrayal in the Synoptics need not be a function of oral tradition, but a reflection of the rational interests of elite, imperial writers” (171). In the spectrum of historical writing to fictional writing, these subversive biographies are generally agreed to fall on the fictional end, and Walsh more fully embraces this point in a conclusion that reflects upon the problems that authorial agency and creativity cause for historians who use literature like the gospels to make claims about early Christian groups. Walsh’s overall assessment of this undertaking is pessimistic: “I find that making concrete claims about reality in literature and art is slippery business at best” (198).

The book has a refreshing edge in that it challenges so many deeply held assumptions and traditional goals of scholarship on the gospels (stop the search for early oral traditions about Jesus; give up the idea of “communities” associated with the gospels; entertain the possibility that the gospels were written by and/or for non-Christians). Yet, that breadth of interest also gives the book an uneven quality. All of these gauntlets may need to be thrown down, but doing so simultaneously leaves little space for detailed argumentation.

For example, it seems noteworthy that the majority of the works that Walsh finds most closely comparable to the gospels have been described as “open texts.”<sup>[2]</sup> A key feature of these works is a high degree of textual fluidity, which makes the task of traditional textual criticism difficult. In some cases, it is not practicable to reduce the existing manuscripts to anything resembling a single, “authorial” text. Grammatiki Karla has written that “versions of the *Life [of Aesop]* differ greatly from each other, both in number and sequence of the episodes and in their language and narrative style (detailed or condensed) to such a degree that the reconstruction of an archetype seems impossible.”<sup>[3]</sup> How do we conceive of “authorship” in such situations? When does someone stop being a copyist or scribe and start being an author? Walsh does not address such questions, and her depiction of the synoptic gospels, with each having a singular “rational agent” behind it, sits somewhat uncomfortably among these “open texts.”

In fact, if we were to *actually* treat the synoptic gospels as we do copies of other ancient literature that show comparable levels of similarity, we would probably not refer to individual “gospels” at all but simply describe them collectively as shorter and longer recensions of the same work, the *Words and Deeds of Jesus of Nazareth*, vel sim. The idea of the synoptic gospels as discreet texts written by different individual, identifiable authors may itself be a relic of the kind of second-century Christian thinking that Walsh seeks to expose.

Overall, the issue of authorship deserves more nuance. One example can illustrate several complications. Early on, Walsh includes Epictetus in a list of typical “authors” (15-16). To the best of my knowledge, however, we have no descriptions of Epictetus’s own writing practices, other than a note in the *Suda* that he “wrote many things.” What we do have are the two works that have survived through manuscript transmission under the titles *The Discourses* (Αἱ Διατριβαί) and *The Handbook* (Τὸ Ἐγχειρίδιον), which are described respectively as notes and an epitome written not by Epictetus himself but by Arrian, who would be the active “rational agent” in Walsh’s framework.<sup>[4]</sup> Arrian’s prefatory letter to *The Discourses*, however, introduces further ambivalence about the act of composition:

“Arrian to Lucius Gellius, greetings! I have not composed (συνέγραψα) these speeches (λόγους) of Epictetus in the way that one would ‘compose’ (συγγράψειε) such things, nor have I published (ἐξήνεγκα εἰς ἀνθρώπους) them, for I do not claim to have composed them. Instead, I attempted to write down (γραψάμενος) whatever I heard him say (ὅσα ... ἤκουον αὐτοῦ λέγοντος), word for word as far as was possible, in order to keep notes (ὑπομνήματα) of his thought and frankness of speech for my own use in the future. So, they are what you might expect one person to say spontaneously to someone else, not the kind of things one would compose (συγγράφου) for people to read later.”

A passage like this can and should be subjected to rhetorical criticism, but on almost any reading, it shows that “authorship” in the Roman world could be a rather tricky concept. It also demonstrates that the relationship between a written text and oral teachings can be less neat than Walsh’s bifurcated model allows. This preface presents Arrian as a conduit of the *speeches* of Epictetus, characterizes the text as “notes” rather than literature proper, but at the same time *The Discourses* contain descriptive narration (e.g., 1.11), not just the words of Epictetus. Moreover, if we do consider the writings of Arrian/Epictetus as “normal ancient literature produced by educated, elite members of Greco-Roman society,” it is also instructive to see how modern scholars have treated these texts. The preface of *The Discourses* marks Arrian as the writer of the text, but classicists and historians of ancient philosophy have generally viewed Arrian’s role in the production of these texts as little more than stenography and have unhesitatingly used *The Discourses* as direct evidence for the Stoic educational environment depicted within the text. Thus, scholars’ treatment of the synoptic gospels in this regard is perhaps not quite as idiosyncratic as Walsh characterizes it.

Even if I am unpersuaded by some of Walsh’s arguments about authorship and book culture

in Roman antiquity, these chapters make for stimulating reading. The book is highly provocative and should elicit spirited debate among New Testament scholars.

### Notes

[1] On this “consumer literature,” see Guglielmo Cavallo, “L'altra lettura. Tra nuovi libri e nuovi testi,” *Antiquité tardive* 9 (2002) 131-138.

[2] Walsh uses the phrase periodically (110, 179, 190-191, 194). The concept of “open text” in reference to ancient literature seems to have developed along a separate trajectory from the more well-known use of the terminology associated with Umberto Eco, but Walsh does not discuss the history of this vocabulary. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

[3] Grammatiki A. Karla, “The Literary Life of a Fictional Life: Aesop in Antiquity and Byzantium,” in Carolina Cupane and Bettina Krönung (eds.), *Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 313-337.

[4] The closing titles of the individual books in the Bodleian codex (MS. Auct. T. 4. 13) name both figures, using the form Ἀρριανοῦ τῶν Ἐπικτήτου Διατριβῶν [book number]. For Arrian's role in the production of *The Handbook*, we rely on the preface to the commentary on *The Handbook* by Simplicius. See Ilsetraut Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire sur le Manuel d'Épictète* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 192.