Introduction

The Problem of a Literary History of the New Testament

The New Testament contains twenty-seven writings from a small religious subculture in the Roman empire of the first two centuries. All the writings originated between about 50 and 130 C.E. They constitute a segment of an extensive body of early Christian writing, of which about ninety documents have survived, either entire or as fragments.[1] The early Christian writings outside the canon are summarized under the rubric of "New Testament Apocrypha."[2] Since the seventeenth century one group of "orthodox" writings among these has been singled out as "the Apostolic Fathers" because their authors supposedly lived in apostolic times; in fact, they originated in the post-apostolic period (ca. 90–150 C.E.).[3] On the other hand, many apocryphal writings were considered more or less "heretical." Most of these are documents related to Gnosis, a radical redemptive piety that from the beginning of the second century C.E. onward offered a profound reinterpretation of early Christian faith.

The idea of a canon, attested since about the year 180, and its acknowledgment in the next two centuries constituted the end of early Christian scriptures, in which we may count all the writings that formally continue the literary history of the New Testament and in their content draw on the same complex of convictions and traditions as the New Testament writings. With the acknowledgment of the idea of canon there arose a theology characterized less and less by a creative continuation of New Testament content and forms in new documents, and more and more by interpretation of the New Testament and the adoption of forms and motifs from the general literature of antiquity. Patristic literature replaced early Christian literature. We can illustrate the literary-critical transformation in terms of two developments between 100 and 180 C.E. The first is very revealing of the attitude of early Christianity toward itself and its traditions: the (second) conclusion to the

Gospel of John, at the end of the first century, points to an indefinite number of possible gospels: "There are many other things that Jesus did . . . if they were all to be written, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). In contrast, Irenaeus asserted around 180 that there was a fourfold gospel, corresponding to the four wind directions and the four figures around the divine throne (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.7-9). For him there were necessarily four gospels and no more. The idea of a closed canon is present; all that seems to remain open is the actual extent of the epistolary literature. A second development is indicative of Christianity's relationship to its environment: at the beginning of the second century Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny[4] all agreed that Christianity was an enormous superstition. On the other hand, in about 176/180 C.E. the Platonic philosopher Celsus published a polemical writing against the Christians, his "True Discourse" (*alēthēs logos*). In it he took Christianity seriously as a philosophy, even as he rejected it as a novelty and a deviation from ancient truth.[5]

"Literature" comes from *littera* (letters). A nominal definition of the word could describe every written and printed text as literature. But receipts, forms, and lists—that is, texts without connected sentences—are not literature, despite their written form. The great national epics and many small forms such as fairy tales, legends, sagas, jokes, and anecdotes were originally handed on orally and yet were undoubtedly literature, even in their oral form. The Bible, too, stems from streams of oral tradition and remained embedded in them: biblical writings were disseminated orally, by being read publicly at worship. Thus a usable definition of literature for our purposes would be: *Literature is constituted by coherent oral and written texts that, by their nature and intention, are public*. However, their public nature is only evident when the writing and the general nature of the addressees are viewed in combination. What precedes is literature in the process of origination. Paul's letters were only subsequently literature, when they were published with the claim that they were directed not only to their addressees in Corinth or Rome but to all Christians. Originally they were correspondence, that is, occasional texts, but their content pointed far beyond the situation of their origin. Therefore a complete definition of literature would be: *Literature consists of coherent oral and written texts that are intended to be public and are not exhausted by the immediate purpose for which they are used*. Contracts, edicts, and collections of laws are accordingly not literature—unless they have a sense beyond their use value, as do, for example, the laws in the Old Testament.

But many kinds of texts, including religious literature and poetry, have a value beyond their immediate use.[6] Therefore we must ask further: what is special about religious literature? It is not purposeless, like poetry. On the

contrary, the New Testament texts were shaped by their social use. They are intended to influence people, to win them to faith, and to encourage them to action. But they, too, have an indirect value of their own beyond those purposes: they are intended to make transcendence accessible and thus point toward an absolute intrinsic value that gives them a literary quality. The relationship to this intrinsic value explodes the use value of the texts. In classical aesthetics, religious texts therefore belong not to the beautiful, but rather to the exalted, in which the content can explode the form. The Greek Bible, the LXX, was first quoted in the first century C.E. in a pagan text "On the Sublime": "Similarly, the legislator of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed and expressed a worthy conception of the might of the Godhead, writes at the very beginning of his Laws, 'God said'—what? 'Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land'" (9.9).[7] The sublime consists in the experience of what, because of its superior power, strength, and perfection exceeds our power of comprehension. It works through repulsion and attraction, as *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.[8] Religious texts thus, precisely through their relationship to transcendence, have an aesthetic quality. In addition, they share four qualities with poetic texts: by their nature they are poetic, pictorial, fictional, and form-giving.

Poetical quality consists in the fact that texts, in the form in which they present themselves to the senses (through rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and parallelisms) are self-referential. In the New Testament there are many texts with such a self-referential poetic quality: hymns, beatitudes, doxologies, the Our Father. One aspect of literary criticism of the New Testament is bringing its poetic qualities to the fore. Of course, poetic quality (in the narrower sense) is not what is decisive.

More important is the *imagery* of New Testament texts. Poetry expresses in concrete events and images something that far surpasses what is immediately signified. The same is true of the New Testament. In it, all forms of discourse in images, in metaphors, allegories, similitudes, parables, example stories, illustrative sayings, symbols, and myths point beyond the realm that furnishes the imagery to the realm of God. The Bible is full of the language of religious imagery.

For the first Christians these images were unassailable realities. They were not being poetic when they spoke of heaven and the underworld, of devils and demons, of the Son of God and of angels. It is only the modern mind that has to deliberate with itself about what it regards as poetry and what as reality. Only in the poetic texts of the New Testament, such as similitudes and parables, is there a common understanding between ancient authors and modern readers about the *fictional character* of these texts.

Literary criticism of the New Testament is not theological criticism. The texts have effect not only *what* they say theologically, but also *in the way* they say it. The formal language of the New Testament literature gives them a solid location in interpersonal communication and in religious communication between human beings and God. This *formal language* is the primary object of a literary-critical history of the New Testament. Its content cannot be separated from it. Only where there is plausible agreement between statements of content and particular forms has a literary critique achieved its goal.

A brief glance at this formal language will give us a preliminary overview. In the New Testament we find two basic forms and three subforms: gospels and letters are the two basic forms, multiply attested. There are four gospels and twenty-one letters. In contrast, the three subforms, the Acts of the Apostles, Revelation, and the letter to the Hebrews, which has been given a ramshackle letter frame,[9] appear in only one example each. Even in the ancient church the collection of these writings had begun to be transformed into a diachronic arrangement.[10]

Among the gospels a distinction was made between the older, Synoptic Gospels and the later Gospel of John as the "spiritual gospel." The gospels were arranged in their supposed chronological order, which they have since maintained in the canon: the Gospel of Matthew was regarded as the oldest gospel because it came from an apostle and eyewitness. With it, the New Testament begins. It is followed by the Gospel of Mark as something written by an interpreter of Peter. In third place was the Gospel of Luke, as the witness of a companion of Paul. The gospel writing was completed by the latest gospel, that of John, attributed to a beloved disciple of Jesus who had grown very old.

Among the letters, two collections were distinguished: the letters of Paul and the catholic letters. Paul's letters were addressed to concrete communities and persons, while the letters of the other apostles and the brother of the Lord were directed to all Christians. The latter were therefore called "general" (or "catholic") letters.[11] The collection of Pauline letters is always placed before the catholic letters. Within the individual letter collections, the ordering is by length, beginning with the longest letter, Romans.[12]

The three individual examples of genres are positioned within the New Testament in interesting fashion: Acts does not follow the Gospel of Luke, although it regards itself as that Gospel's continuation. In the manuscript tradition it was seen as the introduction to the catholic letters, so that the "deeds of the apostles" (*praxeis apostolōn*) are followed by their "words" in the form of letters. The letter to the Hebrews appears in three different places in the manuscripts: either at the beginning of the collection of Pauline

letters, after Romans, or in the middle, after the congregational letters, or at the very end of the Pauline collection.[13] The Apocalypse of John (Revelation), as a prophecy of the future, has its fixed place at the end of the New Testament, but this separates it from the other Johannine writings. A general overview can make clear the resulting structure of the New Testament:

Table 1: The Structure of the New Testament in the Ancient Church Tradition

Gospels		**Letters**	
(a) Synoptic Gospels		(a) Pauline Letters	
Matthew		Romans	
Mark		[Hebrews]	
Luke		1–2 Corinthians	
		Galatians	
		Ephesians	
		Philippians	
		Colossians	
		1–2 Thessalonians	
		[Hebrews]	
		1–2 Timothy	
		Titus	
		Philemon	
		[Hebrews]	
(b) Gospel of John	Acts of the Apostles	(b) Catholic Letters	Revelation
The spiritual gospel	= Introduction to the catholic letters	James	= third part of the *corpus Johanneum*
		1–2 Peter	
		1–3 John	
		Jude	

Modern historical criticism made further distinctions possible. It organized the gospels in a new way: The Gospel of Mark was recognized as the oldest gospel. Alongside (and probably before) it was the so-called "Sayings Source," a common source for Matthew and Luke. These two old sources were followed by the two long Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, whose origins were dated between 80 and 100 c.e. The Gospel of John, with its new interpretation of the figure of Christ, somewhat akin to Gnosis, was considered the latest gospel. An analogy to its reinterpretation of the Jesus tradition was found in the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945, since in that gospel also the Jesus tradition was revised in a gnosticizing direction.

Modern criticism also distinguished among genuine and non-genuine Pauline letters. By general consensus there are seven genuine letters: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. There is agreement about their relative sequence only with regard to 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans, since 1 Thessalonians is certainly the oldest Pauline letter (written ca. 50/51), and Romans is clearly Paul's "testament," that is, a Pauline letter that contains Paul's last will, independently of whether the letters to the Philippians and Philemon preceded or followed it. All other Pauline letters are regarded as non-genuine or "deuteropauline": it is true that Colossians and 2 Thessalonians are occasionally defended as genuine even by very critical exegetes, but increasingly they are regarded as non-genuine even by conservative scholars. There is consensus on the non-genuine character of all the other letters: Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews.

Regarding the catholic letters, only a minority of exegetes assume that the names of the authors are accurate. There is, however, agreement that all the letters are dependent on Paul in terms of their form. Without him the letter would not have become the second basic form of early Christian literature. Acts is seen as the second part of the twofold Lukan work, while Hebrews and Revelation represent independent theological initiatives. The modern exegete's picture of the New Testament looks something like this:

Table 2: The Origins of the New Testament from a Critical Viewpoint

Jesus Tradition	*Epistolary Literature*
The Oldest Sources	*Genuine Pauline Letters*
Sayings Source	1 Thessalonians
Gospel of Mark	Galatians
	1–2 Corinthians
	Philippians
	Philemon
	Romans
The Great Synoptics	*Deuteropauline Letters*
Matthew	Colossians
	Ephesians
	2 Thessalonians
	1–2 Timothy
	Titus

Luke +	Acts of the Apostles	Hebrews	
Gospels Closer to Gnosis		*Catholic Letters*	
Gospel of John +		1–3 John	Revelation
[Gospel of Thomas]		James 1–2 Peter Jude	

With such distinctions between an older and a newer layer we have the beginnings of a literary history of the New Testament. Its task is (1) to organize the writings that are placed alongside one another atemporally in the canon in an order of historical development, (2) to locate their formal language within the history of ancient literature, and (3) to interpret these forms as the expression of the social dynamics of early Christian groups. In all three cases it is necessary to understand the special character of this literature. Nowadays each of the individual New Testament books boasts textbook knowledge about author, origins, and time of composition—with a few recognized alternatives that are subject to discussion. For a comprehensive literary history that distinguishes phases and follows lines of development, on the other hand, there is no established body of knowledge. There are even many skeptical voices that, because of the fragmentary character of our tradition, doubt that such a coherent literary history is possible.[14] It is right to say that we have only fragments of an early Christian literature. We know scarcely anything about the lives of its authors. A biographically-oriented description is impossible. The datings are uncertain. Likewise difficult are attempts to distinguish phases of development. To date there has not been a single attempt in that direction. The same is true of localizations. We do not know what writings belong together regionally. But the fragmentary character of our body of writing should not deter us. "Literature is the fragment of fragments; the least of what happened and was said has been written down, and of what was written, the least part has remained."[15] If literature is fundamentally a fragment, the fragmentary character of early Christian literature should not prevent us from considering it from a literary-critical point of view, especially since there are good predecessors and preliminary works leading to a literary history of the New Testament. Four phases of this work can be distinguished.

Efforts to produce a literary history of the New Testament began in the eighteenth century with Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).[16] He was the first to recognize that there had been an oral prehistory of the gospels

and letters. The New Testament writings contain the oral proclamation of the apostles. Orality was characteristic of their message: "A law is written; a message of good news is proclaimed."[17] Their preaching was composed of brief pericopes: "The common gospel arose out of individual bits, narratives, parables, sayings, pericopes."[18] This in turn is explained by the fact that this is popular literature: "It attests to the truth of the Gospel that it is made up of such parts: for people such as most of the apostles were can more easily remember a saying, a parable, an apophthegm that struck them than the connected speeches in which John later depicted his friend."[19] The New Testament was a literature not of the learned, but of simple people. It arose within Judaism, which was part of the "childhood of the human race" and as yet was unaware of any foreign literature, but rather, in its ancient holy books, "dwelt as in the sanctuary of all wisdom."[20] Herder saw clearly the relative isolation of this literature in contrast to the remainder of ancient literature and its relationship to Jewish literature. For him, the Old and New Testaments were the poesy of an immature humanity, which must be understood historically. He thus founded a historical-aesthetic approach to the Bible that is able to value it positively and is free of dogmatic premises.[21] It is true that one must pose the critical question: Can the Bible really be understood as the expression of a naïve, childish mentality, and are eighteenth-century categories adequate to an aesthetic appreciation of it as poetry? The song of the Suffering Servant speaks about a mysterious figure: ". . . he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2). Whether the Servant is the people of Israel or an individual figure—in any case, the aesthetic of the beautiful and the naïve is inadequate here!

A new phase of literary-critical study of the New Testament began in the nineteenth century with Franz Overbeck.[22] For him, literary-historical criticism was the history of literary forms.[23] His thesis was that of the two basic forms of the New Testament, the gospel is an original creation of early Christianity, while the letter, as a practical text, is not real literature. He called both forms "primitive literature" (i.e., literature that is seen as still in its formative phase). Such literature, for him, displayed two characteristics: On the one hand it was creative in producing something entirely new, such as the gospel form, which he regarded as a historically underivable genre that originated in the soil of early Christianity. On the other hand "primitive literature" was not yet independent of its author, with whom in this formative period the addressees could interact, as in the case of the letters of Paul. The author could not yet be separated from his writing. Hence primitive literature was still part of the prehistory of literature proper, its influence independent of the existence of its author. For Franz Overbeck, isolation was

also characteristic of early Christian literature. In its origins it was totally unconnected to the greater literary world of the time, and its influence was likewise not in sequence with anything in the history of the church. The real history of Christian literature, according to Overbeck, began with patristic literature, that is, the Apologists and the Church Fathers, when Christianity adopted the forms of secular literature. Until that time it had kept its literary forms separate from the world.[24] To understand Overbeck's concept of a primeval literature one must realize that for him the New Testament "primitive literature" is part of the "primitive history" of Christianity, a history without any continuation in the world because it was shaped by an eschatological anticipation of the imminent end and was not conceived as being the beginning of a long history in this world. Thus the origin of early Christian literature was paradoxical: why should people who expected an immediate end to the world produce writings, since the whole world, with its writings and its books, would soon be gone?

The third phase of literary-historical criticism was shaped by the so-called form criticism of the twentieth century, in the work of Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and Karl Ludwig Schmidt.[25] They affirmed in principle Overbeck's postulated underivability of the gospel form, but focused on a historical and sociological derivation of the very singularity of the New Testament writings. Their explanation was that here groups who were unfamiliar with literature had taken up the pen.[26] Comparable forms were popular books, unpretentious literature in little tracts and brief writings.[27] No wonder that these texts did not make use of an elevated literary language! The "Sitz im Leben" of this literature was the lower class. The transition from the people's oral tradition to written literature explained their uniqueness and "underivability," and above all why they were so strongly marked by conventions and recurring typical motifs. Thus in essence these writings were collective creations, not the expressions of individual talent. The evangelists were first reduced by form criticism to redactors, collectors, and tradents; only in a second stage, so-called "redaction criticism," were they rediscovered as authors and theologians with their own literary and theological intentions. This explanation, too, stumbled across a paradox: if early Christianity came from non-literary classes, why did it produce such a rich literature? Why did people take up the pen if they were not at all "programmed" to produce literature?[28]

At present people are moving a step farther, seeing that early Christian literature is not unique because of its non-literary background, but rather is part of a separate literary culture, that of Jewish-Hellenistic *koinē* literature.[29] With the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Judaism had created a literature for itself in the Greek language,

using not the elevated form of Greek, but the everyday form, the so-called *koinē*. In doing so it departed from non-Jewish ancient literature. Within the sphere of influence of this special Jewish literature there arose, in turn, another special literature, that of early Christianity. The narrative style of the evangelists—episodic, with few authorial narrative interventions, but containing many dialogues in which persons within the narrative comment on what is happening—has a model, for example, in the Septuagint. As with the other proposals, we encounter a paradox here: if the Septuagint (or the Hebrew Bible in the Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christianity of Palestine) was the Bible of the first Christians and had such great significance that it shaped their language and style—why were they not content with that Bible? Why did they create a new group of writings that later, as the "New Testament," augmented the Old? And why are so many non-Jewish, Hellenistic influences evident in the formal language of the New Testament?[30]

Thus the origin of the New Testament is associated with three paradoxes: people who expected the end of the world created a literature for the ages, as if the world would last a long time. People from non-literary classes took up the pen and created a literature that remains alive today. People who were at home with their Bible created a new Bible with a formal language that was not derived from their familiar "Bible." These paradoxes make it appear almost "miraculous" that there was any early Christian literature at all. But all three paradoxes may be resolved.

The thesis about imminent expectation of the end as a factor impeding literary creation is false. Jewish apocalyptic writing is full of imminent expectations and yet attests to a flourishing literary production. The author of the book of Daniel was convinced that the end of the world would happen 1,290 days after the desecration of the sanctuary in the year 167 B.C.E. (Dan 12:11). While work on the book of Daniel was still in progress the expected time passed, and he had to offer a new reckoning. He extended the deadline by forty-five days and called those blessed who endured and attained 1,335 days! (Dan 12:12). His expectation of the imminent end did not prevent him from writing a book that was quite extensive in contemporary terms. He wrote for a group, for eschatologically-motivated groups need scriptures with which they can legitimate their expectations, maintain the unity of the group, and secure against doubt. Since they lived in a culture in which writings possessed religious authority, they would scarcely have done without this way of maintaining group cohesion. Some authors may even have dreamed of being able to study scrolls even more intensively in the new world that was about to break in![31]

It is also possible to understand why people from a non-literary lower class became active producers of literature. Writing presumes a high degree

of self-confidence. What a person experiences, suffers, dreams, or hopes must appear so valuable to her or him that she or he communicates it in writing. That was precisely the case with the first Christians. The awareness of standing on the threshold of a new world gave them a high sense of their own personal worth. What had happened to their founding figure was as important to them as the story of a king or philosopher whose biography might be written. Equally important to them was the history of their little group. It was worthwhile to report on it in the Acts of the Apostles in a way that otherwise only the history of whole nations deserved. In their own self-understanding, they were not members of the unimportant sub-classes, but the elite of the new world: the elect, the saints, those who had been called.

Does having a Bible prevent the production of a new Bible? The letter of Barnabas attests to the possibility, at a much later time, of grounding Christian faith solely in an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. It is possible that the first Christians might have been content with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures if they had remained part of Judaism. But they pushed very quickly beyond the bounds of Judaism and attracted non-Jews to their beliefs. Thus it is no accident that their first writings came out of the Gentile mission, where Paul had to solve and give answers to a very different set of problems. Paul wrote long texts without reference to the Jewish Bible—for example, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon.

That an early Christian literature was created is thus not as paradoxical as it seems at first glance. What is much more in need of explanation is *how* it was formed and shaped. We found a number of explanations proposed by form criticism for its unique literary character: as the poesy of an immature humanity it attests to its naïve origins; as a primitive literature it is an original creation of early Christianity; as minor literature it is the product of lower literary classes; and as a *koinē* literature it is an outgrowth of the Septuagint and Hellenistic Judaism. All four suggestions contain some truth, but they all ignore not only the paradoxes we have mentioned, but problems that make a new proposal worthwhile.

Johann Gottfried Herder was correct: the Bible is a piece of literature, human poesy, that must be read altogether, in historical terms, as a human testimony. But is it really the product of a naïve and immature creative power? The aesthetics of the Bible can only be understood against the background of the history of the sufferings of the people Israel. It is not an aesthetic of beauty and harmony, but of hideousness and failure. The simple "people" who exercised their creativity here do not fit into any popular idyll; they were an oppressed nation of little people. The New Testament must thus be read, with Herder, in a historical-aesthetic light, but as the expression of a broken aesthetics. A modern aesthetics that knows how to deal with the

absurd, the broken, and the fragmentary is better suited to these writings than a classical aesthetics.[32]

Some of the New Testament writings may be primitive or primeval literature in Franz Overbeck's sense, but by no means all of them. Of the twenty-seven documents, at least ten are pseudepigraphical writings that imitate genuine documents. In such counterfeits the real author hides behind a different name and withdraws from interaction with his or her readers. The author is not creative, but imitative. Using both of Overbeck's criteria, therefore, one must clearly distinguish these pseudepigraphical writings from a "primitive literature." We must ask: did the primitive literature end with the pseudepigraphical writings in the first century C.E., and not with the transition to patristic writings in the second century? Or must we not distinguish at least two phases within the history of early Christian literature, a first phase of "primitive literature," and a second, imitative phase of pseudepigraphical literature?[33] And in that case do we encounter further phases—for example, when early Christian authors disengaged from the great charismatic authorities and models and created writings according to their own formal laws, as in the case of the Acts of the Apostles or the letter to the Hebrews?

The early Christian writings were certainly minor literature. The form critics correctly perceived that. This characteristic in particular distinguishes this literature from the biblical writings of the Jews, whose center was the Law that exists for the whole people. According to tradition, kings were involved: a Jewish king with regard to Deuteronomy, a Persian with Ezra's law, a Ptolemy with the origins of the Septuagint, even though it was no king, but God who was regarded as the origin of the Law. The New Testament, in contrast, was the literature of a small group. No king gave it a public character. No nation sought to use it as a rule for the whole of life. Thus we must ask: how did people from small groups decide to commit to paper these ideas with their universal claims? What role did they assume in doing so? Were they really part of a literary underclass? Did they not necessarily have a certain competency in literary writing—in the midst of a population of which perhaps ten to thirty percent were able to read and write at all, and in which literary types within that ten to thirty percent were themselves a vanishing minority?[34] Nevertheless, the form critics were right on one point: what is special about the New Testament may be that, while authors with literary competency and from relatively educated classes were writing, they were deliberately creating a literature for non-literary lower classes. One unique feature of early Christian literature may have been that it crossed class boundaries.

The early Christian writings would be unthinkable without the Jewish *koinē* literature in the wake of the Septuagint. Nevertheless, the two basic

New Testament forms, gospel and letter, have fewer models in the Septuagint than in Greek and Roman literature. There was no writing in the Judaism of the time that was so thoroughly concentrated on a single person as are the gospels,[35] but there were many biographical texts in non-Jewish antiquity. There was no letter collection in Judaism (in the Septuagint) that could have served Paul as a model for his letters, but there were many collections of letters in the Greco-Roman world. Although the New Testament is part of Jewish-Hellenistic *koinē* literature, its basic forms were inspired by the non-Jewish world. Hence the question: is the reason for the special nature of the New Testament that in its formal language (just as in its content) it crosses cultural boundaries? Klaus Berger and David Aune have quite rightly and consistently located the formal language of the New Testament within Hellenistic literature.[36]

In response to these four questions, the present book will sketch the fundamental outlines of a literary-critical history of the New Testament. In the process, the contradictions we have addressed will be resolved. Early Christian literature does not consist exclusively either of creative primitive literature or of literature dependent on traditions; it is bound neither to non-literary lower classes nor to literary upper classes in its Jewish or its non-Jewish shape. What is characteristic of it, rather, is that it crosses boundaries. This can best be shown by describing its origins and development. Four phases may be discerned, and we will describe them first in a few words. Each will then be discussed at greater length.

The history of the New Testament literature began with Jesus and Paul. These two charismatics, through their work and in very different ways, brought the two fundamental forms of the New Testament—gospels and letters—into existence. In this first phase the *authority of persons* was dominant. Only in this early stage can one, in my opinion, speak of "primeval literature" in Overbeck's sense, for gospel and community letter are new creations by early Christianity, even though they took inspiration from their environment.

In the second phase this literature was continued by means of a *fictive self-interpretation* of Paul in the non-genuine Pauline letters and a fictive self-interpretation of Jesus in additional gospels. This was no longer "primeval literature," but imitative traditional literature. It presumes the authority of the writings and forms created in the first phase and bases itself on the authority of the tradition created by the two great charismatics, Jesus and Paul. It hides behind these charismatics. It is pseudepigraphical or deuteronomic (that is, it makes use of someone else's name).

In a third phase, genres were created from *functional* standpoints. That is: texts now gained their authority not only from being traced to known

charismatics, but also through the material demands of particular genres. To the authority of persons and traditions was added the authority of form. The Acts of the Apostles is a historical work intended to meet the material criteria of historical writing. The Apocalypse is revelatory literature that contains within itself its own authority. The letter to the Hebrews is a discourse fulfilling rhetorical demands for a good disposition and elegance of language. Of these new forms only the Acts of the Apostles, the letter to the Hebrews, and the Apocalypse were received into the canon. Other functional genres such as "dialogue with the Exalted One" or pure "collections of sayings" are part of the (apocryphal) early Christian literature outside the New Testament.

The final phase was the *construction of the canon*. It looms at different points as a potential compromise, but was hastened in response to the catalyst of an alternative canon proposed by Marcion in the second century C.E. Marcion's canon, consisting of *one* gospel and *one* apostle, is not the positive model for the new canon but its negative model: against it, the plurality of gospels and of authors of letters and the duality of Old and New Testament became the consensus position. Marcion had only one gospel, only one apostle, and only the one New Testament. In rejecting him, the remaining Christians found it easier to come together. The canon is the expression of a religious community of the church type, which tolerates internal plurality and at the same time distinguishes itself from groups (such as the Marcionites) standing in too much tension with the world. Through the construction of the canon, the New Testament writings became a religious world literature.

The division of phases suggested is ultimately supported by the fact that the "apocryphal" early Christian literature can be understood as the posterior effect of the forms and motifs of these four phases. We will therefore attempt in a final chapter to interpret the New Testament apocrypha as the expression of new charismatic beginnings, the continuation of pseudepigraphical literature, but above all an expression of the tendency to establish functional genres. Since what we present here is only a sketch for a literary-critical history of the New Testament, the relatively brief treatment of the extra-canonical writings is justifiable. But even if we concentrate on the New Testament, the literary history of the whole of early Christianity constitutes the necessary background.

The program for a literary-critical history of the New Testament presented here thus consists of two fundamental ideas: first, the suggestion that charismatic, pseudepigraphic, functional, and canonical phases should be distinguished within it; second, the proposal that this four-phase development reflects the social dynamics of early Christianity and that a variety of

structures of authority follow one another and overlap: the authority of the person, of tradition, of form, and of community. Writings with characteristics of the first phase thus coexist with writings from subsequent phases and the various writings overlap chronologically. This is especially true of the transitional period from New Testament to patristic literature, during which forms from all four phases existed simultaneously. These four phases will now be described in fuller detail.