

# Preface

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This outline of a literary history of the New Testament is based on a lecture given before the Philosophical-Historical Class of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences on 27 November 2004. It is a subject rooted in Heidelberg's traditions. The Heidelberg New Testament scholar Martin Dibelius wrote one of the first basic proposals for a "history of early Christian literature" (1926), and his student Philipp Vielhauer developed his ideas in an extensive "history of early Christian literature" (1975); as his assistant, I was present at the origins of this work. Both scholars emphasized the isolation of early Christian literature from its Hellenistic context. A counter-current running against this view began in the 1970s. Thus my colleague Klaus Berger was able to point out a great many "Hellenistic genres in the New Testament" (1984). The Heidelberg student of antiquity Albrecht Dihle treated early Christian literature in his 1989 work "Die griechische und lateinische Literatur der Kaiserzeit" as a part of ancient literature. The present proposal continues all these lines. Since I began to study theology and German literature I have had the dream of a literary history that would make it possible, through the use of literary-critical methods, to understand the origins of the New Testament as the beginnings of one of the most important collections of texts in the literature of world religion. The presentation concentrates on the development of the formal language of the New Testament in four phases, intending thereby to make visible its connection to its environment and to the overall history of early Christianity. The preparation of this book was made possible by a study year in the Heidelberg College for Ancient Studies, 2005–2006, which allowed time for a thorough revision of the first draft. I thank all those who made that research year possible for me. I am grateful to Corina Cloutier and Kristina Wagner for their assistance in reading the proofs, and to Dr. Bernhard Mutschler for a critical reading of the whole manuscript and many valuable suggestions.

I dedicate this book to the theological faculty of the Reformed Károlyi Gáspár University in Budapest, who bestowed an honorary doctorate on me

in October 2005. Thirteen years ago, with a series of lectures in Budapest on “Gospel Writing and Church Politics,” I began my thoughts on a literary history of the gospels. Some of the ideas then presented in Budapest have been carried out in this book with regard to the entire New Testament.