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The Influence of the Romantic Genius in Early Christian Studies

This article proposes that critical scholarship of the New Testament has inherited from German Romantic and Idealistic thought a number of presumptions about the role of the author that have contributed to idiosyncratic approaches to these texts when compared with allied studies of ancient literature. Namely, "critical" scholarship has continued to impose anachronistic, Romantic ideas of an implicit *Volk* (people, nation) or inspirational *Geist* (spirit) onto early literature about Jesus. I offer an alternative reading of the authorship of the gospels that reads them like other ancient literature, centered on concrete evidence for ancient literary practices.

IN THE eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the texts of the New Testament were increasingly viewed through a "critical" lens within the academy. The field of what would come to be known as early Christian or New Testament studies imagined itself as departing from what Hans Frei termed a "precritical" reading of these ancient writings. However, the discipline continued

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to advance the view that the literature and social history of the first-century Jesus movement is best understood within the context of "early Christian communities." Upon reflection, the concept of "community" employed by these early critical scholars, in many respects, mirrored coeval, German Romantic ideas on folk speech, oral traditions and communal authorship. This uncritical adaptation of certain Romantic concepts by the field represents a fundamental flaw in the historical-critical efforts of the thinkers Frei describes as "explaining the thoughts of the biblical authors… on the basis of the most likely, natural, and specific conditions of history, culture, and individual life."[1] Rather than offering an historical analysis of the writing culture of the first-century, studies that referred to communities of early Christians reified the mythic origins of Christianity as established by texts like the Acts of the Apostles.[2] In so doing, these so-called "critical" treatments of the New Testament participated in maintaining a theological narrative about the miraculous development and cohesion of early or "primitive" Christianity, ignoring the reality that writing texts in the first-century was largely the purview of the educated elite.[3]

Building on Frei's work on tracing the intellectual development of "critical" reading, I propose here that critical scholarship of the New Testament—a field that emerged within the Romantic philosophical, political and cultural movement—has inherited from German Romantic and Idealistic thought a number of presumptions about the social formation of early Christianity, and the role of the author within their presumed community, that have contributed to the development of approaches to early Christian literature that are idiosyncratic when compared with allied studies of ancient literature.[4]

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[1] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 18.

[2] For more on the influence of Acts on so-called Christian origins, see William E. Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2011): 193–215.

[3] As I will discuss, "elite" in this case refers to levels of education and does not necessarily correspond to class. Many of our ancient writers were slaves or *libertini* (e.g., Epictetus) or the sons of freedmen (e.g., Horace).

[4] On the subject of Romanticism's influence on early Christian studies, see Stanley K. Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2011): 238–256. Stowers's piece also critiques the concept of community in New Testament and Early Christian studies. I build on this conversation with the inclusion of literary theory and discussion of the Romantic genius. Stowers's thesis is ground breaking as predominant approaches in the field rely on the notion of community authorship in some measure, as I discuss. Prior to Stowers, scholarship on these

Outside of the study of the New Testament, ancient authorship is generally attributed to literate specialists with the attendant training and means to circulate writings within networks of similarly skilled literate producers. Yet "critical" scholarship has continued to impose anachronistic, Romantic ideas of an implicit *Volk* (people, nation) or inspirational Geist (spirit) onto early literature about Jesus. This misstep is particularly evident in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, a figure also treated extensively by Frei, whose writings contributed to the idea that communities are the presumptive social environment of the poetic "Genius" in Romantic imagination or, in this case, the early Christian author. While other disciplines long-ago abandoned the anti-rationalist notion that the Geist animates literature and history, engaged the deconstructionist turns in literary theory (the so-called "death of the author"), or turned to critical social theory, Biblical studies has remained stubbornly steeped in talk of "primitive Christians," cohesive communities and reliable oral traditions. I offer an alternative reading of the authorship of the gospels that reads them like other ancient literature, centered on concrete evidence for ancient literary practices.

German Romantic Influence on New Testament/Early Christian Studies

At the core of political Romanticism and German Idealism was the notion that human beings, and human culture, cannot exist outside of a community or state.[5] The early Romantic poet Novalis (1772–1801), for instance,

subjects were largely restricted to the observation that the term "community" required further nuance, or that Romanticism continues to loom large in discussions of myth. For example, on the specific influence of Johann Gottfried Herder, see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 211, and Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton Univerity Press, 2000), 7–25; 208–300.

[5] The question of what the category "Romanticism" encompasses is complex. It is widely accepted that it designates philosophical and theological lines of thought that emerge following the work of Friedrich Schlegel; however, one occasionally finds secondary material that refers to the German intellectual movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a period of Romantic thought, subsuming the Idealists (e.g., J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. von Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel) under the Romantic banner. In some measure, this is a misleading designation that fails to appreciate the degree to which Romanticism proper emerges as a counter to post-Kantian idealist views, yet the term nonetheless acknowledges the complex of political, social and intellectual change that characterized the Romantic era following the American, French and so-called Copernican revolutions.

argued "To become and remain human, man needs the state. Without a state, man is a savage. All culture results from the relationship between man and state."[6] This sentiment also found expression in the work of Romantic thinkers Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) and Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), who maintained that the "authentic Christian consciousness belongs not only to the solitary *homo religiosus*… [it] is fundamentally collective and communal, the *sensus communis* of the faithful," thus amalgamating "the identity of the Christian consciousness of the individual… with the consciousness of the whole Church."[7] Moreover, a divine Spirit, a communal Geist, which imparted revelation onto its members, bound this community. This shared divinely-inspired and universal spirit found expression through the mouthpiece the Poet; an interpreter of nature in both poetry and prose, representing his community of fellow men. To borrow a phrase from the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, the Poet was an elite "producer of cultural goods," representing in literature the collective voice of

On the development of ideas of cultural community and cosmopolitanism within German Idealism and Romanticim, see Dieter Sturma, "Politics and the New Mythology: The Turn to Late Romanticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 230–31: "the state itself is understood as a person… every state is an individual existing with its own specific character, and… it governs itself according to specific laws, customs, and practices." However, also see Herder who, in response to the French Revolution, would claim: "Nature creates nations, not States." This emphasis on the state should not be confused with nascent appeals to nationalism or nationalistic sympathies. See Berlin, *Three Critics*, 213–34.

   [6] Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, Vol. 3: *Das philosophische Werk II*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer: 1968), 548. Cited from Sturma, "New Mythology," 230. In this case, Novalis's use of the term "savage" (*Wilde*) is pejorative; however, particularly in later German Romantic thought, the idea of the "noble savage" would take hold—a man who is uncorrupted by civilization's ills.

   [7] Johann Adam Möhler, *Unity in the Church*, ed. and trans. Peter C. Erb (1825; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 39, §12; James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 193. The notion of a "*sensus communis*" was widespread and persistent in both Enlightenment and German Romantic thought. See Gerald Ernest Paul Gillespie, Manfred Engel, Bernard Dieterie, ed., *Romantic Prose Fiction* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2008), 517:" "By placing the source of myth in the collective conscious, German Romantic myth theorists, such as Görres, Kanne, the Grimm brothers and Bachofen presupposed a unified mythical *Weltanschauung* among all peoples, epochs, and generations that evidenced objectively knowable and legitimate Truth. This mythological sensus communis developed unmistakably from the Enlightenment construction of natural religion and vision of common beliefs in a common humanity and Herder's cosmopolitanism."

an otherwise disjointed communal body.[8] In the view of early critics of Biblical writings, the Poet is found in scripture through the writings of the so-called Hebrew poets and the evangelists. In the case of the canonical gospels writers, their chronicles of Jesus's life and death were directives of the *Geist* or Holy Spirit, embodying the sacred tradition of the Church; however, they were representative of their immediate communities as well. As Möhler explains, "in this reception of the word, human activity… has necessarily a part."[9]

Schlegel and Möhler represent a pervasive notion in German Romantic thought: the author is synecdochal of both a unifying, inspirational *Geist* and the community in which (usually) he is writing. German ideas about the state, theory of knowledge and value theory (e.g., moral and political philosophy and aesthetics) that emerged as a response to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution have had significant and persistent influence on European and American intellectual life and culture. One might even say that the works of Romantics like Herder constituted something of a Big Bang in approaches to historiography, philology and linguistic theory in particular.[10] The vestiges of this influence are detectable in approaches within certain academic fields—for instance, those concerned with issues of historiography. Some of these fields have acknowledged their legacies of Romantic thought, with their terms, methods and dominant discourses taking derivative or innovative turns (e.g., literary theory). However, in many respects, the study of early Christianity remains perhaps unwittingly steeped in Romantic influence.

In order to demonstrate the connections between Romanticism and early Christian studies that I am proposing, I will focus primarily on the work of two Romantic thinkers: the aforementioned Johann Gottfried Herder and

[8] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 115.

[9] Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolism, or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolical Writings, trans.*, trans. James Burton Robertson (1832; New York: Edward Dunigan, 1844), 350; Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 194.

[10] See, for example, Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983). Of course any treatment that attempts to link such diverse lines of thought into a tidy framework is, by nature, something of an oversimplification. I do hold, however, that the parameters I have outlined here are, in the main, descriptive of developmental trends in the fields I have referenced.

Johann Adam Möhler. In their respective theorizations on language and culture, each of these men envisioned an artificially narrow field of influence for writers. The frameworks they established have subsequently contributed to the idea that communities are the presumptive social environment of "the Poet" or, in this case, the early Christian author. I offer a close reading of their work, prefaced by an overview of two main themes in Romantic thought germane to understanding the context of their treatments of literature: Romantic ideas about societal structure, sometimes referred to as theories of organic form and the role of language in the demarcation and development of culture. I approach these subjects through an investigation of the role of the poetic "Genius" in Romantic imagination.

The Romantic Genius

Before delving into an examination of Romantic influence on the study of early Christian writings, it is first necessary to situate my thinking in light of two pertinent issues in literary theory: the Romantic idea of the solitary "genius" and developments in structuralist and deconstructive approaches to the author in the twentieth century—sometimes referred to as the "death of the author." Although in some respects similar insofar as each bring to light questions of authorial agency and subjectivity, the importance of these approaches for this study center around how I understand the role of the author in the production of literature.[11] In short, I am not attempting to revive the Author-Genius or the Romantic-expressive model of authorship. Nor am I going so far as to engage in structuralist lines of thought that would attribute

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[11] See Andrew Bennett, "Expressivity: the Romantic" in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57: "Inasmuch as Barthes's declaration of the death of the author may be said to be directed against the Romantic-expressive model of authorship, we might conclude, it is misdirected. What Barthes's attack overlooks or misrepresents are precisely the complexities and self-contradictions that energize Romantic poetic theory. The expressive theory of the author as articulated by writers of the Romantic period interrogates the subjectivity and self-consciousness of the author; it interrogates problems of language, representation, and textuality; it interrogates questions of authorial intention, volition, and agency. And despite the importance of the provocation of his essay, it is, in a sense, Barthes himself who closes down these questions by promoting a reductive version of expressive authorship in order to argue against it, and indeed to argue for a notion of the author that is already at work in the Romantic theory of authorship itself."

the authorship to "innumerable centres of culture."[12] I am instead proposing a rich and dynamic social context for ancient writers and other literate experts based on historical evidence of their activities. A brief overview of the contours of these theories will help explain why what I am proposing differs from these models.

Beginning with the former, the concept of "genius" or "the genius" in Romanticism is not, as we might imagine in contemporary understanding, a theoretical or conceptual extension of reason. Following Immanuel Kant, it is a form of unconscious expression of literary or other artistic meaning that transgresses strictures of convention, while still remaining aesthetically successful.[13] Kant referred to genius as the "innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art"—thereby establishing a symbiotic, and tautological, relationship between the artist and nature itself.[14]

Romantic thinkers like August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel would add to this doctrine a Romantic theory of literature. Friedrich Schlegel in particular brought to bear the autonomous activity of the poet, with "poetry" (*Poesie*) functioning as an act of continuous creativity or imagination that subsumes all other past expressions of literary genius into its process of achieving "perfect totality."[15] For Schlegel, out of the "deepest depths of the Spirit (*tiefsten Tiefe des Geistes*)," poetry is an expression of "a progressive universal poetry (*Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie*)… Only it can, like the epic, become a mirror of the whole surrounding world, a picture of the age."[16] Poetry was an expression of its immediate milieu. However, to be

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[12] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 142–148.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 317–18. Also see Andrew Bowie, "Romanticism and Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, ed. Nicholas Saul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 250.

[14] Ibid., §46 (186). Emphasis original. On genius as "nature's favorite" see §49 (191).

[15] Jürgen Klein, "Genius, Ingenium, Imagination: Aesthetic Theories of Production from the Renaissance to Romanticism," in *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 59. Also see Gregory Moore, "Introduction," in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Shakespeare*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxi: "the genius was a second Creator, a Promethean figure who imitated not the ancients or other writers but only nature… the genius created instinctively, promiscuously, with God-given powers."

[16] *Athenaeum: Eine Zeitschrift von August Wilhelm Schlegel und Friedrich Schlegel* II/2 Vieweg, 1798 (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1960), 204 (*fr*, 116).

clear, this was not to suggest that the poet was engaged in articulating stages within a grand narrative of history. The linear progression of history was an Enlightenment position rejected by the Romantics, who instead understood historical development as a continuous, cyclical processes of the birth, growth and decay. Past "organic forms" of history could inform present understandings and artistic productions (e.g., the dramas of the ancient Greeks, the poetry of the ancient Israelites), but each culture was uniquely expressed within its epoch, informed by its own particular historical circumstances.

The period in which ideas about the genius were being discussed was known as the *Geniezeit*—the "age of the genius"— and would give rise to significant innovations in political theory, ethics and epistemology. It also provided the foundation for a shift in theories of language that willingly abandoned the dominance of French neoclassicism and the German *Kanzleistil* of the previous generations in favor of identifying literary figures representative of a less elite and unifying "*Deutsch*." The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Germany had seen the "Lilliputian statelets" and other relatively autonomous regions of that geographical expanse coalesce into the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, albeit without any cohesive political, economic or cultural keystones.[17] It therefore fell to the Romantic thinkers, like Herder, to establish an invented tradition for Germany—one that demonstrated continuity between the present amalgamated culture and a conceptually unified past.[18] In attempting to reclaim this past, the search for German heritage extended beyond the borders of what constituted Germany, and past "the old fault line dividing Latin from Germanic Europe."[19]

Among the individual geniuses identified by Sturm und Drang and Romantic movements, William Shakespeare stands out as a seemingly peculiar choice to represent the language of unified Germany. However, his treatment by men like Herder is instructive for understanding why the individual ancient author I am attempting to redescribe in this project is not commensurate with the Romantic genius. Locating German heritage—the language and art of the people, the non-elites—entailed looking to poets and geniuses like Shakespeare who were unencumbered by the *délicatesse* of the French and, as such, better represented the unmediated spirit of the German peo-

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[17] I follow much of Moore's account of German history in the following section. See Moore, "Introduction," viii–x.

[18] For more on later German nation building and invented tradition, see Arnal, "Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition'," 199–200.

[19] Moore, "Introduction," xi.

ple. Shortly before the Romantic movement, Heinrich von Gerstenberg, for instance, imagined Shakespeare presenting "living pictures of moral Nature" and, later, Herder would herald him as a craftsman of *Volkspoesie* (popular poetry), along with the likes of Homer, the poets of the Hebrew Bible and Ossian.[20] For instance, Herder avers that in Shakespeare:

> The *whole* world (die *ganze* Welt) is only body to this great mind: *all* scenes of nature limbs on this body (*alle* Auftritte der Natur an diesem Körper Glieder), as *all* characters and modes of thought traits to this mind (wie *alle* Charaktere und Denkarten zu diesem Geiste Züge)—and the *whole* (*Ganze*) may be named as that giant god of Spinoza *"Pan! Universum!"*[21]

What Herder means by this is that through Shakespeare there is not only an expression of artistic genius, but also a synthesis of history in the manner in which he is able to pull together disparate characters, plots, languages and circumstances into an organic whole.[22] Elsewhere Herder would claim that "the proper subject of the historical sciences is the life of communities and not the exploits of individuals... great poets expressed the mind and experience of their societies."[23] Indeed, the anti-Enlightenment notion of society—and religion— as a unified organism, animated by its own particular Spirit (*Geist*) was widespread in the Romantic period.[24]

Therefore, in Romantic thought, Shakespeare was a genius representative of his broader cultural milieu. Like Sophocles before him, he reflected the social life and customs of his epoch.[25] But, crucially, that social life was not expressed through the oppressive literary scruples of his period. It was

[20] Heinrich von Gerstenberg's Letters on Curiosities of Literature (1768) quoted from Moore, "Introduction," xvi. Also see ibid., xvii–xx.

[21] Herder, "Über Shakespeare," in *Werke* 5: 220–26. Herder's reference to Baruch Spinoza in this passage is likely in respect to the latter's monist philosophy, but may also signal the *Pantheismusstreit* controversy between Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Gotthold Lessing.

[22] Herder, *Shakespeare*, 30: "He took history as he found it, and with his creative spirit he combined the most diverse material into a wondrous whole."

[23] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 211.

[24] Ibid., 213: "the spirit of a nation or culture had been central not only to Vico and Montesquieu, but to the famous publicist Friedrich Karl von Moser, whom Herder read and knew, to Bodmer and Breitinger, to Hamann and to Zimmermann. Bolingbroke had spoken of the division of men into nationalities as being deeply rooted in Nature herself."

[25] Herder would also call Shakespeare "Sophocles' brother" in these discussions. See Herder, *Shakespeare*, 49. Robert Edward Norton explains: "in the Shakespeare essay [Herder] triumphantly displayed the one basic modus operandi that united the otherwise apparently so

expressed through the plain speech of the people. In his introduction to a translation of Herder's treatment of Shakespeare in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (On German Character and Art), Gregory Moore explains:

> although Sophocles and Shakespeare may be outwardly dissimilar, they have a spiritual kinship that all geniuses share: they are true not only to nature… but also to the culture from which they emerged… Both are mouthpieces of the collective soul of the nation, expressing its thoughts and sentiments, manners and morals; in each case their art is a development of indigenous species of expression.[26]

German and English alike could unify under the cultural banner of the genius of Shakespeare, insofar as his work expressed the spirit of the common people, the *Volksgeist*, and their unique experiences and culture. By the later Romantic period, the institutionalization of *Germanistik* and proto-nationalist projects like that of the Grimm brothers would increasingly look to the *Volkspoesie* and language of the German people for evidence of their shared history. Yet the Author-Genius continued to function as the inspired mouthpiece of the people and their collective experience of their environment.[27]

The Romantic "Genius" acting as a spokesperson for his kinsmen is a model for understanding the production of literature that shares a great deal with the kinds of approaches in early Christian studies that focus on the author as a redactor of sayings, teachings and other materials deemed essential

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dissimilar playwrights… Sophocles and Shakespeare were literally worlds apart in every other respect but in their representative fidelity to nature." Robert Edward Norton, "The Ideal of a Philosophical History of Aesthetics: The Diverse Unity of Nature," in *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 79–80.

Interestingly, in his "Demythologizing: Controversial Slogan and Theological Focus," Rudolf Bultmann cites Shakespeare (*Tempest* IV, 1) and Sophocles (*Ajax* 125–26) as examples of "mythical eschatology," thereby maintaining the comparison generations later. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 295.

[26] Moore, "Introduction," xxx.

[27] Herder would not live to see Napoleon Bonaparte conquer Austria and Prussia (1805); however, the civic reforms and rebellions that would follow stoked the proto-liberal nationalism articulated by Herder, with the abolishment of serfdoms and the rise of the peasant class. See Hans-Joachim Hahn, "Germany: Historical Survey," in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850*, ed. Christopher John Murray (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 418–21.

or representative of his community. This community is traditionally envisioned as a religious group of some stripe, unified by their shared "mind and practice." Stanley Stowers, reflecting on the concept of community as it pertains to its use in the field, notes that nineteenth-century ideas of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) were often associated with notions of "an essential and totalizing identity and commitment" akin to the idea of conversion.[28] This is the same kind of wholesale "turning" of allegiance augured in passages like Acts 4:23: "the great number of those who believed were of one heart and one mind."

However, it would be an oversimplification to say that when scholars in the field of New Testament and early Christian studies use the word "community," they are consciously engaging the paradigms of the Romantics. Likewise, not all scholarship on the social world of the early Christians has engaged in discourse about communities or, if they have, some have recognized that the model is problematic.[29] Yet it remains the case that the study of early Christianity largely persists in making appeals to concepts of community that are at best ill-defined or, more usually, myopically focused on *religious* social formations. Moreover, much like the Author-Genius Shakespeare speaking for the "illiterate, low-liv'd" Elizabethan, the early Christian writer is often

[28] Stowers, "Concept of 'Community'," 239. Stowers cites the late nineteenth-century work of Ferdinand Tönnies, stating: "with his dualism between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the former supposedly based upon the essential will (*Wesenwille*) of the participant."

[29] For instance, John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of the Early Christians* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 10: "My view is that past failures to deal with the rise of Christianity in social terms have resulted in serious distortions of the historical realities. Despite all their talk about the need to determine the *Sitz im Leben* of a given passage… students of early Christian literature have given remarkably little attention to the social dimensions of these communities. Thus the emphasis given here to the social aspect of world-construction stems from a basic conviction that the process of generating a sacred cosmos or a symbiotic universe is always rooted in concrete communities of believers. This conviction takes us beyond the standard claim that religious beliefs and institutions are subject to the influence of social factors in their environment, for it makes the assertion that without a community there is no social world and without a social world there can be no community"; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 13: "We must, for instance, resist the temptation to see so much of early Christian literature either as a community product or as reflecting the actual circumstances of the communities with which the writings are associated. We too frequently read of communities that virtually produced one or another of the Gospels or for which they were produced."

imagined within a coterie of illiterate fellow Christians.[30] This model for an-
cient authorship agitates against what we know about the practices of those
with sufficient education and training to produce and circulate writings in
the ancient Mediterranean world.

Authorship in antiquity was a complex and highly specialized activity
wherein an author's network of fellow writers was often the most formative
in terms of the development, exchange and publication of writings. While
one might be trained in certain scribal practices or memorization techniques,
the ability to produce literature according to accepted standards required an
advanced rhetorical education.[31] Moreover, a writer's most immediate and
formative social network was his circle of fellow writers and literary critics—
an interconnected network of professional authors and literate consumers
with particular kinds of "intellectual" knowledge and skill. Again, borrowing
from Bourdieu, I refer to such groups as networks of elite "literate and spe-
cialized cultural producers."[32] These networks could consist of close friends

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[30] Bettina Boecker, "Groundlings, Gallants, Grocers: Shakespeare's Elizabethan Audience
and the Political Agendas of Shakespeare Criticism," in *Shakespeare and European Politics*,
ed. Dirk Delabastita, et al. (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing, 2008), 221–22: "one of the
main functions of the Elizabethan audience has been to excuse the Bard's perceived faults and
shortcomings. It is already in the very early stages of Shakespeare criticism that this tradition
is established: the representatives of an age perceived as uncivilized and rude, Renaissance
theatergoers personify the allegedly detrimental influence of Shakespeare's historical situation
on his work… If blaming the audience for "corrupting" Shakespeare seems, at first glance, to
be nothing more than a less-abstract version of blaming the age, it is important to note that
several eighteenth-century critics implicitly or explicitly characterize Shakespeare's original
audience as lower class. Taylor portrays Renaissance theatergoers as "illiterate, low-liv'd me-
chanics," while Pope ascribes Shakespeare's faults to the necessity of pleasing "the populace,"
"the meaner sort of people." The nexus between Shakespeare's "un-Shakespearean" bits and
the lower social orders remains undisturbed by the Romantics' reevaluation of the concept
of the people… Nevertheless… the eighteenth-century notion [remains] that Shakespeare's
genius is quintessentially ahistorical."

[31] Seneca, for example, speaks of a Calvisius Sabinus "who had bought high priced slaves
trained to be living books: each one had learned one classical author by heart—Homer, Hes-
iod, or the Lyrics—and had the suitable quotations ready at the disposal of their forgetful
master during the banquet conversations." See Christian Jacob, *The Web of Athenaeus*, trans.
Arietta Papaconstantinou, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Center for Hellenic Studies; Cam-
bridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 79; Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius* 3.27.5. This
kind of training in memorization does not mean that Calvisius Sabinus' slaves would also be
in a position to produce literature.

[32] William A. Johnson, "Pliny and the Construction of Reading Communities," in *Readers
and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*, Classical Cul-
ture and Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33: "Pliny also had luminary lit-
erary connections. Quintilian was his teacher… he counted among his *amici* Tacitus… and

and teachers; a group of writers supported by the same patron, like the Augustan poets; or activities performed within certain philosophical schools, such as writing commentaries. However, to be clear, while the majority of our evidence for these activities comes from the descriptions of writers who were themselves financially elite, it does not follow that class and literacy were necessarily determining factors in antiquity; one could be slave or *libertini* with enough education to compose a piece of literature, nonetheless one's immediate network would consist, in some measure, of fellow literate elites. Writings produced within these networks could circulate outside of their immediate social group to associated, literate writers or other audiences, such as with booksellers. However, literature was ultimately a product of an author's education, training and range of literary and other interests, as well as the feedback received from social peers. In his work on reading culture in the Roman empire, William A. Johnson refers to these close-knit literary networks as "*amici*" who circulated writings for critique and then gathered to recite, discuss, promote or reject new works and would-be authors, and to "elicit advance criticism so that the author could revise his work for publication."[33] First-century CE writer Pliny the Younger describes his own literary circle as a group of *amici* or "friends dedicated to the literary enterprise… characterized by a reciprocity that recognizes common values, 'of which the most important is the rhetorical mastery of language.'"[34] As such, the most important and crucial social network for an individual writer was other writers and associated groups that participated in the interpretation and circulation of literature.[35]

Suetonius… and Martial; he was less familiar but well acquainted with Silius Italicus… of the previous generation. He does not mention Plutarch directly, but they shared two close consular friends." Also see *Vergil, Philodemus and the Augustans*, ed. David Armstrong, Jeffrey Fish, Patricia A. Johnson, and Marilyn B. Skinner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Elaine Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture: From Cicero to Apuleius* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[33] Johnson, "Pliny and the Construction of Reading Communities," 52. Johnson is citing the work of Roland Mayer, *Tacitus: Dialogus de oratoribus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 92 on Tacitus, *Dialogus* 2.1.

[34] Johnson, "Pliny and the Construction of Reading Communities," 52. Johnson is summarizing Pliny, citing Florence Dupont, "*Recitatio* and the Space of Public Discourse," in *The Roman Cultural Revolution*, ed. Thomas Habinek and Alessandro Schiesaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 44-59. Also see Craig A. Williams, "Love and Friendship: Authors and Texts," in *Reading Roman Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174–258—particularly the sections on the letters of Cicero and Fronto.

[35] I am following Stowers, "Concept of 'Community,'" 247, in this description.

I will return to the practices of ancient writers in a moment, but it is crucial to note at this stage that, although likely not all members of a truly elite segment of society, it nonetheless follows that authors like the gospel writers were constrained by the same practical aspects of writing ancient literature as any other writer in the ancient world—that is, they required the same relative levels of education, necessary training and associated social networks. They composed their writings under the same plausible and practical conditions as other writers within the field of literary production in antiquity. Therefore, persisting in discussions about the *Christian* communities of the gospel writers ignores one of the most plausible formative social networks for the production of this literature.

Beyond the practical aspects of the production and publication of literature in antiquity, the Romantic ideal of the Author-Genius is incommensurable with ancient writers in three fundamental and interrelated respects. First, the literary practices of ancient authors were not the "pure" and unmediated activities of a poet inspired by creative Nature to express the *Geist* of the people. Ancient writers possessed rich and complex reasons for composing their works as active agents, and their productions should not be understood as the expression of the totalizing "mind and experience" of their societies or immediate communities.[36] Second, this is not to say that authors are not engaging certain canons of literature, literary traditions or attempting to represent particular kinds of discourses in their writing. On the contrary, these authors are self-consciously choosing and crafting their referents and source materials in a rational way. Speaking of Romantic, aesthetic values as they pertain to ancient literature, Tim Whitmarsh notes that Greek literary culture of the Imperial period was for some time viewed by scholars as an "embarrassing epilogue" given that its writers' were perceived as failing to embody the Romantic "obsession" with "originality" and "inspiration" characteristic of the Author-Genius. Writers like those of the Second Sophistic, however, were prized in their milieu precisely for their ability to participate in the "creative imitation" of other texts or the "intertextual refashioning of earlier literary works."[37] Skill was judged by the author's ability to consciously select the traditions from which they wished to emulate and their ability to "play the game" of participating in that literary culture. It was not judged by to what extent the author, propelled forward by the *Geist* of the age and their own aesthetic talents, could faithfully represent the *Volk*.

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[36] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 211.

[37] Tim Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

It is misleading to associate writers exclusively with non-elites in an attempt to say something about the "common traditions and common memories" of the *Volk*.[38] Writers may reflect certain discernable aspects of the language, culture, politics and concerns of their milieu, but they are not unvarnished mirrors of the imagined experiences, traditions and needs of unique groups or other categories of people. For example, and relevant to the last point above, if a study of literary culture in antiquity demonstrates it is the author's critical writing "circle" of fellow elite cultural producers that is the most immediate and formative social context for the production of literature, there is no compelling reason to think that the writers of early Christian literature should be situated in a different environment.[39] Even among the second-century founders of the orthodox Christian church—for whom the gospel writers represented established first-century "Christian" groups, living in urban Greek-speaking hubs (e.g., Rome, Antioch, Ephesus)—these authors were motivated to put pen to paper (so to speak) by the desire to preserve an authoritative account of Jesus's teachings; nonetheless, they remained literate elite, often described as attending figureheads like Peter or Paul or their immediate followers.[40] It is my contention that this under-

[38] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 234.

[39] See, for example, Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture*. Speaking of the literary communities of elite authors like Pliny, Johnson states: "The community is characterized by a reciprocity that mutually recognizes common values, 'of which the most important is the rhetorical mastery of language'" (52).

[40] The question of the interpretation of the gospel authors before the time of Romanticism is larger than can be adequately addressed here; however, while I do believe the Romantic movement represents a sea change in how these authors were *critically* understood as representative of the *Volk*, I concede that some parallels can be drawn between how these authors were described by both the German Romantics like Herder and the church fathers. *Against Heresies*, for example, attributes the writings designated as Mark and Luke to direct followers of "Peter and Paul preaching at Rome, and laying down the foundations of the Church" (*AH* 3.1–2). Appealing these writers as literate and authoritative, as well as to the notion of an associated "school" or "church," was key for resolving the lurking problem of historicity as, among the leaders who would come to represent Christian "orthodoxy," the historical accuracy of the canonical gospels (along with other collections of Jesus's teachings or *bios*) was disputed, with commentaries offering conflicting endorsements of their content. As the writings known as Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John became codified as *the* representative *bioi* of Jesus, inconsistencies between them were explained as differences between long-standing, divinely-inspired, regional "traditions." The transformation of these texts from first-century *bioi* to canon also annulled any sense of the purpose and function of the gospels relative to the genre of biography in its first-century—and post-War—context. Thus one could argue that claims about disciples, apostles and the Holy Spirit replaced any thoroughgoing description of

standing of the gospel writers persisted until the critical application of literary theory with the Romantics.

The Death of the Author

One of the central issues with the Author-Genius *writ large* is that it wrests agency away from the author as a rational actor. Interestingly, this approach to literature has much in common with twentieth-century structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to anti-authorialism. It is useful to pause for a moment and examine this turn in literary theory, in part because its missteps further demonstrate the historical implausibility of the Author-Genius model.

Born of the rejection of subjectivity by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the so-called "Death of the Author" eradicated the authorial subject from the production of literature by positing that language and knowledge exist before the consciousness of the author translates them into a particular discourse.[41] Seán Burke describes this development as the "expulsion of the subject from the space of language… call[ing] into question the idea that man can properly possess any degree of knowledge or consciousness."[42] In other words, it is not a "self" or an "*I*" author who speaks in literature, but it is language. Barthes explains:

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*: language knows a "subject" not a "person," and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language "hold together," suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.[43]

the normal processes of ancient writers. However, this kind of approach to rereading Christian history in critical scholarship was subsequently authorized by the Romantic movement and its ongoing influence on the fields of New Testament and early Christian studies.

[41] Space prevents me from discussing all three theorists in this piece, so I limit myself to Barthes. A future project may look in more detail at the influences of Derrida and Foucault.

[42] Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 14.

[43] Barthes, "Death of the Author," 145. Earlier Barthes explains: "As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function than that of the very practice of the symbol itself… the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142).

Thus, the author is not only excluded from literature, s/he is considered never to have existed in the first place. Informed by Russian formalists like Vladimir Propp—who, incidentally, were informed by Romantic poetics— the symbolic logic of the text and its cultural signifiers become the medium of composition.[44] Simply put, cultures write texts, not authors. Barthes in particular held that the individual author, the genius, was a purely "modern figure"—that is, a product of nineteenth-century theocentrism.[45] It was this figure that Barthes and his sympathizers wished to eliminate from the text in order to foreground the neglected reader.

Barthes continues to hold enormous sway in contemporary literary theory. His approach to the author has become so formative that in structuralist and poststructuralist thought, it is often taken "almost as an article of faith."[46] However, critics of Barthes have noted that the elimination of the author has not so much destroyed the "Author-God" as participate in its construction by "creat[ing] a king worthy of the killing."[47] Moreover those who continue to claim that the text belongs purely to language have offered few compelling rationales for "proceeding… from this calm insight to the claim that the author has no part to play in the processes of text formation and reception."[48] It is in this critique of the death of the author's humanist opposition that I place my own project. Texts are the products of authors engaged in certain practices and conventions that correspond with their social contexts. They are not disembodied or passive filters of broader cultural structures.

Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" is instructive on this latter point. Habitus signifies an unconscious socialization that takes place among agents that drives them to the internalization of the various conditions (e.g., social, economic) that comprise their "field" or sphere of social and cultural existence. Another way to describe habitus might be to say that people act in ways

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[44] For the Romantic influence on Vladimir Propp and other formalist critics, see Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[45] Barthes, "Death of the Author," 143. Ironically, Sturm und Drang thinkers like Hamann similarly held that the language of symbols and feelings are antecedents of the activity of the genius. In some important respects, the Romantics and structuralists were not alien to one another. See Burke, *Death and Return*, 14, 22, 30, 46, 88, 204.

[46] Ibid., 16.

[47] Ibid., 25.

[48] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface to *Of Grammatology*," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), lxxiv, cited in Burke, *Death and Return*, 26.

that are both practical and plausible given their social location and context. Bourdieu focuses his theorization on these actions in terms of practices: "the practices of the members of the same group or, in a differentiated society, the same class, are always more and better harmonized that the agents know or wish."[49] More than an amorphous designation of 'culture' on a broad scale, Bourdieu situates agents according to their relative power and cultural capital within specific fields of activity. Elsewhere, he describes habitus as a set of practices that are "internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions."[50] Rather than attributing something like authorship to a broad and amorphous concept like 'culture,' Bourdieu's pillars of habitus and field allow for a "socialized subjectivity" which unites structures with agents.[51]

The implications of Bourdieu's theorization for understanding the ancient world are that it allows for authors to engage in literary practices that are normal for their historical circumstances and social location. This means that authors participate in particular standards and practices that are dictated by their levels of education, social class and background, as well as established methods for the composition and circulation of their texts, as discussed above. In other words, they are rational agents who make decisions in and about their writings based on knowledge of certain literary conventions, relevant bodies of literature and the kinds of issues being actively discussed within their historical field. They are very much "alive." Moreover, contra the Romantics, they do not produce literature that is inspired by the *Geist* and communal mind of an ill-defined social body. Their historical processes, literary fields and social networks can be described and analyzed.

The example of Luke-Acts helps to illustrate this last point. Beyond an interest in cultivating a myth of Christian origins, "Luke" the author demonstrates knowledge of the Septuagint, Mark, and arguably the letters of Paul and the hypothetical source Q (*Quelle*).[52] Given the level of education indicated by the quality of his writing, he was also likely aware of Augustan-era

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[49] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (1980; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 59.

[50] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (1979; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[51] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 126.

[52] For discussion on the question of Luke's use of Paul's letters, see M. Eugene Boring, *An Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literature, Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 577–78.

literature such as Virgil and other forms of ancient epic. Like Virgil, Luke claims to have a patron; he has an interest in establishing the divine genealogy of a dynastic family; he interprets visions and prophecy; and he writes about a founding figure tasked with establishing a new community. He may have also read *bioi* of notable philosophers and statesmen or some of the writings of the Second Sophistic or Neopythagorean pseudepigraphica.[53] In short, Luke is an author situated within many interconnected networks of literacy. His prologue, in fact, alludes to others before him who have "undertaken to draw up an account" of the life of Jesus and that he has taken it upon himself to "write an orderly account" after consulting a variety of oral and literary sources. Scholars tend to focus on the possibility that Luke is offering evidence in this passage for the kinds of oral traditions and other "gospels" imagined to represent the impressive range and diversity of the early Jesus movement; however, in effect, what Luke is saying is: "other writers and storytellers have tried to convey this story, but I can write a much better one." Luke is situating himself in a competitive field of other writers from the very beginning of his work. He is not simply cataloging the developing theology of a community of Christians gathering in a house church.

It is essential to reiterate that I am not attempting to claim that New Testament and early Christian scholarship has heretofore failed to recognize literary parallels between the gospels, Q and material like *bioi*, *chreia*, epic and the like. Rather I am arguing that certain strains of Romantic influence have hindered our approach and analysis of these texts, often painting a picture of early Christian history that is mystifying, ahistorical and idiosyncratic, particularly in its focus on (religious) communities. To illustrate what I mean by this, borrowing a reference from Stowers: "Classicists do not approach Vergil's or Philodemus's writings as the products and mirrors of Vergil's or Philodemus's communities."[54] Yet for early Christianity, the community is too often taken as normative. At the conclusion of his volume *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei muses whether "anything has changed… since the days of Schleiermacher and Hegel" in respect to the advent of critical read-

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[53] See Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) and John T. Fitzgerald, *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[54] Stowers, "Concept of 'Community'," 247. Of course an author like Virgil is recognized as belonging to a social network of Augustan-era poets like Horace, Ovid, Propertius, Tibullus that one might term a "community" of a sort. This is precisely the kind of alternative social formation that I seek to identify for the gospel writers.

ings of, in particular, gospel narratives.[55] What my analysis of approaches to the authorship of the gospels reveals is that, in speaking continuously of communities, critical readers of Biblical works in fact imposed on these writings a narrative framework about their historical context and development divorced from the enterprise of "critical" reading. In fact, the approaches to authorship and social structure I have identified have contributed to a view of Biblical literature as the product of the *Volksgeist*.

But how did we get here? I now turn to Romantic theories of language, oral tradition and "primitivism" that have had direct influence on the field of early Christian studies. By "direct influence," I mean that it is possible to trace an intellectual genealogy from the lions of the Romantic movement to many of the theologians and secular scholars at the forefront of the historical study of scripture and Biblical criticism.

Herder, Möhler and The Study of Biblical Literature

A student of Kant and Lutheran pastor, Herder is widely considered the originator of the notion of the *Volksgeist*—the spirit of the German people and nation.[56] His major contributions to post-Enlightenment and theological lines of thinking were in his critiques of language and history. Considering language to be the "foundation of human consciousness" —and not, contra Hamann, principally of divine origin or, contra Rousseau, a human invention—his construction of the circle of language and thought in many ways prefigured Wittgenstein's "language-game," viewing language as "a series of developing revelations" of the human race.[57] To be clear, this is not to say that he held that language signaled a progression of history per se. Rather, each epoch of history—each "cultural phase"—was its own unique expression of what Herder termed *Humanität* (humanity).[58]

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[55] Frei, *Eclipse*, 324.

[56] Coincidentally, Herder's proto-nationalistic positions would have "fateful consequences for the twentieth century" (Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 73). By the end of his life, however, Herder himself rejected nationalism. Isaiah Berlin explains: "He believed in kinship, social solidarity, *Volkstum*, nationhood, but to the end of his life he detested and denounced every form of centralization, coercion and conquest, which were embodied and symbolized both for him, and for his teacher Hamann, in the accursed State. Nature creates nations, not States [through language]. The State is an instrument of happiness for a group, not for men as such." (Berlin, *Three Critics*, 224–25.)

[57] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 74.

[58] Herder's student, Goethe, would describe this theory as a case of nature evolving from "an unknown centre" moving toward "an unknown boundary." J. W. von Goethe, *Goethes*

Herder's view of language had particular implications for his theories of religion. Each religion is embedded in a certain culture and unique to that context:

> Who has noticed how *inexpressible* the *individuality* of one human being is… How different and particular all things are to an individual because they are seen by the eyes, measured by the soul, and felt by the heart of *that* individual? As disparate as heat is from cold, and as one pole is from another, so diverse are the various religions.

For Herder, "like nations and cultures, religions are singular, living organisms." That said, while maintaining that each religious tradition is its own unique and valuable representation of a given culture, he still viewed Christianity as "the true conviction about God and human beings… nothing but the pure dew of heaven for all nations."[59]

In his *First Dialogue Concerning National Religion* (1802), Herder constructs a conversation between two friends in which one friend asks the other "Would you be annoyed if I hold Christianity to be the religion of *all religions*, of all people?" This then leads into an extended discourse on language as that which shapes the "corporate soul" and that those "who are ashamed of their nation and language destroy not only their religion but the bond that ties their people together."[60] Following Hamann, he would equate "linguistic petrifaction" with a valley full of corpses "which only "a prophet" (such as Socrates, St Paul, Luther, and perhaps himself) could cover with flesh."[61] For Herder, the poetic language of biblical texts was the "mother tongue of the human race" and, in this poetry, "the spiritual genius of a whole people is found."

Yet, one could not deny that human hands were at work on the composition of the Bible. Herder acknowledges that the text reveals human "nature and language… according to their weaknesses and within the limitations of

Werke, *Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften* 1, ed. Erich Trunz, Hamburger Ausgabe, 14 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1981), XIII, 35.

[59] Cited from Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 74. The Tübingen philosopher Carl August Eschenmayer would put an even finer point on the matter: the highest expression of *Geist* in human history is found not in art, contra F. W. J. Schelling, but in the early stages of Christianity's development out of the dregs of antiquity.

[60] Cited from Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 75.

[61] Berlin, *Three Critics*, 240.

their ideas." In other words, Biblical poetry carries threads of the culture within which it was composed, expressing "a developing divine revelation" that ultimately grows not from autonomous authors alone, but through the language of the people.[62] By studying the poetry and other writings of Biblical authors, as well as Homer and Ossian, Herder proposed that one could know the "modes of thinking and feeling" of the *Volk*: "how they were educated, what scenes they looked upon, what were the objects of their affection and passion… their dances, and their music."[63]

Perhaps Herder's best illustration of the association between nature and language comes in his *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–1783).[64] In this two-volume work he equates the sensory metaphors used by the Hebrew poets to the pure and child-like nature of their "savage nation."[65] "Savage" is not pejorative in this case, but a reflection of the simplicity of the *Volk* and their closeness to nature. Herder explains: "The more savage, that is, the more alive and freedom-loving a people is (for that is the simple meaning of the word), the more savage, that is, alive free, sensuous, lyrically active, its songs must be, if it has songs."[66] This is the framework through which Herder begins his investigation, opening with a celebration of the music he envisages accompanied the Hebrew poets:

> The rattling of the ancient cymbals and kettle-drums, in short the whole music-band of [that] savage nation… is still ringing in my ears. I still see David dancing before the Ark of the

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[62] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 77.

[63] Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh, 2 vols. (Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833), 28.

[64] Herder's enthusiasm for the Hebrew poets (the *Naturmenschen*) should not be conflated with his views on eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century Judaism. Although he embraced the historical, national character and language of the Hebrew people represented by the scriptures, he was also adamant that epochs remain conceptually segregated and in essence that the modern Jew had little relationship to the heralded and more authentic Hebrew poetry and law. For instance, he held that the "nature of the soul is determined by the natural landscape" and, given the desert terrain of their God-given land, the Jews were "a decrepit corpse." Moreover, he maintained a view of Jews as superstitious and power hungry, the latter a precursor to the fear of *Weltjudentum* and the former evident in the stagnation of natural science and historiography. See Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 59.

[65] Herder, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 26.

[66] Cited from Berlin, *Three Critics*, 242.

> covenant, or the prophets summoning a player, that they may
> feel his inspirations.

Correspondingly, he posits that the first stage of this poetry was chiefly oral. It is the unmediated expression of Geist among the *Volk* and the "simplest [form] by which the human soul expressed its thoughts."[67] He goes on to describe the work of these poets as "imperfect"; "uncertain and far-fetched"; full of "parallelisms" so monotonous they are an "everlasting tautology."[68] He also suggests "with the Hebrew the verb is almost the whole of the language," offering the caveat: "but for this beggarly race of herdsmen, from what sources could they form a language?"[69] However, like with the concept of the "savage," these observations are not designed to be detractions. The language expressed by these poets is the "living language of Canaan… during the period of its greatest beauty and purity… before it was corrupted by the introduction of the Chaldee [and the] Greek."[70] Its active verbs and sensory metaphors combined "form and feeling"; unlike Homer, the words "creak and hiss" and, in its earliest stages, show no signs of having "passed through a refining process."[71]

Eventually these oral traditions would be recorded as *Volkspoesie*, experiencing the "refining process" of being converted into literature. Therefore, while Hebrew poetry was embedded in the language of its Volk, Herder was also aware that it passed through the "weaving of the book according to later disposition"—that is, it passed through the hands of redactors.[72] Naturally, this would result in a certain amount of degradation of the "purer" forms of the original *Poesie*. However, an enterprising analyst could recover elements of the pre-textual oral/folk traditions of the "nation" represented by the text. Herder's model for an oral tradition behind the development of literature would go on to inform Romantic folklorists like Wilhelm and Jacob

[67] Herder, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 46. Also see 94: "All sensuous tribes have a knowledge of that nature, to which their poetry relates; nay, they have a more living, and for their purpose a better knowledge of it."

[68] Ibid., 26.

[69] Ibid., 31.

[70] Ibid., 32.

[71] Ibid., 34, 168. Likewise, just as Herder considered the language of the Hebrews more simplistic and closer to an "unbiased and uncorrupted" state of nature, he considered the cognitive functions and morals of this *Volk* to be similarly "child-like."

[72] Thomas Willi, *Herders Beitrag zum Verstehen des Alten Testaments*, BGH 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 66.

Grimm. However, his methods would also indirectly influence later Form Criticism (*Formgeschichte*) and Redaction Criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) in the field of New Testament studies—particularly members of the History of Religions School (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) among them, Hermann Gunkel and Johannes Weiss.

More immediately, Herder's theoretical reconstructions would impact the work of other nineteenth-century thinkers like Johann Adam Möhler. Möhler was part of the Romantic Catholic theological renewal of the early nineteenth century at Tübingen, until he left to become chair of New Testament exegesis at Munich. Particularly influenced by Herder's conception of society and religion as organic forms, Möhler would develop a theology that traced the *Geist* from its expression in the oral teachings of Jesus through to their present day. He equated this presence of the *Geist* to an understanding of "tradition," calling tradition "ecclesial truths (*Kirchenglauben*) of the first Christian period to the extent that they are regarded as an instruction that has been considered a pronouncement of Christ or of the apostles and as such has been propagated by oral teaching."[73] Moreover, he understood the New Testament to be a record of these oral teachings of Christ through the apostles, the "first *written* document of that tradition."[74]

Building on Herder's organic forms, in his *The Unity of the Church* (1825), Möhler stressed the presence of the *Geist* within the Christian community, stating "The Church is the body belonging to the spirit of the believers, a spirit that forms itself from inward out." It is this notion of an inner "spiritual" life of the community that would become increasingly central in scholarly treatments of early Christian texts, concerned with recovering the teachings, experiences and other holdings of imagined Christian communities. James Livingston explains: "Möhler's ecclesiology is… influenced by the Romantic conception of an organic, evolving, living tradition and a united and unbroken community consciousness that is guided by the Divine Spirit, *in and through which alone* the individual person can understand and appropriate the mysteries of Christian life and belief." Challenging his Protestant interlocutors, however, Möhler did not see the gospels as infallible. Rather, he viewed them as a record of both the "expression of the Geist" at work in human history *and* the needs of the gospel writers or redactors as they se-

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[73] Johann Adam Möhler, *Die Einheit in der Kirche* (Tübingen: Heinrich Laupp, 1825), 114.

[74] Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 193. Emphasis original.

lected the oral and written materials they were to include in their works, all the while carefully preserving the continuity of the "purity and simplicity" of the earliest Christian teachings, to the best of their ability.[75]

As noted above, Möhler and Herder each represent facets or lines of German Romantic thought that were to be found in later Form and Redaction criticism. For Form Critics, early Christian communities possessed oral and/or small collections of written texts, preserving Jesus's teachings as well as elements of their own collective, yet unique, folk interpretations and interpolations. In this construction of history, the notion of an autonomous author was absent. Authorship was fundamentally communal. Certain scholars would take these principles and associate the notion of communal *Geist* with the posited informal folk literature of the Christian communities, for which the gospel writer was a mere redactor of collected, communal materials.[76]

Similarly, many notable early Christianity and New Testament scholars saw in this proposed folk literature a window onto the pre-literary, oral traditions of these early Christian communities. Bultmann, for instance, spoke of a "primitive" Christianity born of Jesus's disciples who viewed themselves as a community of elect "saints" in the final age of humankind, not fractured from Judaism, but aware of their distinctiveness.[77] According to Bultmann, as the "good news" spread beyond the cradle of Palestine and, likewise, Palestinian Judaism, these new and widespread communities reimagined Jesus's words and deeds through a Hellenistic lens. In something akin to a game of Greco-Roman telephone, the "original Palestinian version" of Christianity met so-called Hellenistic Jewish Christians, sympathetic Hel-

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[75] Ibid., 193.

[76] While many examples can be given for the predominant approaches in the field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, take the case of the late nineteenth-century New Testament scholar Gustav Volkmar as an exception to the rule. Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Zurich and President of the Society of Critical Historical Theory, Volkmar attempted to argue that Mark was aware of his literary milieu and built his characterization of Jesus based on the letters of Paul—see his *Die Religion Jesu* (1857) and *Die Evangelien oder Marcus* (1870). The objections to Volkmar were vociferous. To paraphrase his own description of his relationship with his colleagues after presenting this work: "They resolved… to go their way and let me go mine" (*The Chicago Law Times*, July 1888, 326–28). Volkmar's work was dismantled thoroughly in 1923 by Martin Werner's *Der Einfluß paulinischer Theologie im Markusevangelium* and his proposal that any "Pauline" content in Mark must have stemmed from a shared "trajectory" or oral tradition that predated Paul (still the dominant position).

[77] Rudolf Bultmann, "Primitive Christianity as a Syncretistic Phenomenon," in *Primitive Christianity: In its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (R & R Clark, 209-223 1956), 209.

lenistic synagogue-goers and lower-class urban gentiles around the Mediterranean basin and emerged fundamentally altered.[78] These Hellenistic audiences transformed the "original" (read: Jewish) gospel message into something more palatable to their interests and sensibilities. For Bultmann, this Hellenistic transformation included the addition of Greco-Roman philosophy and the "moral ideals of the Hellenistic bourgeoisie."[79]

Bultmann further proposed that a close analysis of the synoptic gospels could "easily [prove]" distinctive layers of original Jesus "tradition." He advocated for a methodological approach that parsed the essential "Aramaic tradition of the oldest Palestinian community" from the material of the manifestly distinct Greek, "Hellenistic Christian community" of the later gospel writers and their fellow Christians.[80] Reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson, this Hellenistic brand of Christianity was seen as imbued with Platonism, Stoicism, pneumatology.[81] Remove these elements, and any evidence of the elitist biases of the urban-dwelling Greek, and you would reveal the origins of primitive Christian discourse. These interpretive moves would have monumental influence on interpretations of Q as well; Bultmann, for instance, proposed that the supposed sayings-source was "a primary source from which we can reconstruct a picture of the primitive community in which the *Logia* [the sayings] arose."[82] The significance of this shift in methodology was that the group was now largely considered the primary actor in the course of authorship, not necessarily the autonomous author. That is to say, the idea of a writer of the gospels or Q was rarely discussed in early Christian literature outside of references to a representative scribe, a redactor, or the like. The idea of collective authorship became the norm or, at the very least,

[78] Bultmann, "Primitive Christianity," 210.

[79] Ibid., 211–12.

[80] Bultmann, *Bultmann: Interpreting Faith*, 97.

[81] Bultmann, "Primitive Christianity," 210: "On other occasions the Christian missionaries went direct to the Gentile population, and then, in the first instance, to the lower classes in the cities. There were probably churches of Gentiles only… Christianity found itself in a new spiritual environment: The Gospel had to be preached in terms intelligible to Hellenistic audiences and their mental outlook, while at the same time the audience themselves were bound to interpret the gospel message in their own way, in light of their own spiritual needs. Hence the growth of divers types of Christianity." On the influence of Jefferson's works and letters on the field of Late Antique Christianity, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "On the Origin of Origins," in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 1–35.

[82] Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Approach to the Synoptic Problem," *Journal of Religion* 6 (1926): 341.

scholars began speaking in terms of the "community" or "communities" that produced these materials, and not individual writers or interpreters.

Redaction Criticism entered into this schema with the notion of a redactor compiling disparate remnants from past Christian communities into a text that reflected not only elements of an authentic more originary Christian past, but the redactor's present social setting, their *Sitz im Leben*. This move found scholars reflecting on the "theology" of the redactor: how their thought "was created or developed within a particular community, the theology that defined and differentiated the community from other communities."[83] The stories about Jesus's life chosen by the redactor also were mined for information on precisely how they were representative of the community's unique concerns. Once again, the poet—the Author-Genius—was the voice of the dissected whole.

For some the "community-writer" perspective is simply cited in kinship with the idea that authors are embedded within particular social or cultural contexts (*Sitze im Leben*), or that their writings are socially constructed products; however, again, it is rare to find a study that does not deem the author's presumed *Christian community* to be the most immediate, formative and relevant social framework. Consequently, the Christian community is theorized in lieu of other kinds of possible social contexts or environments. As such, these writings about Jesus have not been treated by critical scholarship properly as literature. This is particularly evident when one examines the use of the phrase "early Christianity" and its history in scholarship.

The "Primitive" Christians

In German, the word that is most often used in reference to the Jesus movement of the first-century is *Urchristentum*, sometimes translated into English as "early" or, in the case of twentieth-century German scholarship, "primitive Christianity." Correspondingly, the word for the "primitive" or "original" Christians is *Urchristen*. These terms generally take on one or a combination of valences, depending on context. Possible meanings include the temporal sense that one is speaking of the earliest stages and people of the movement that will come to be known as Christianity; that it is in reference to the kinds of "uneducated and ordinary men" referenced in Acts 4:13; or, relatedly, that one is speaking of a group of people akin to the Romantic "Savage"—

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[83] Stowers, "Concept of 'Community'," 241.

simple, illiterate peasants who represent a more "authentic" and pure form of the moral teachings of Jesus. In the case of references to the uneducated *Urchristen*, they are typically imagined as Galilean peasants or representatives of the "primitive Christianity [that] arose from the band of Jesus's disciples," as well as the first "Hellenized" communities that emerged out of the eschatological Palestinian Judaism of the Jerusalem church.[84] Again, this is a model that relies heavily on Acts. Bultmann provides an explanation of how this pattern of development is imagined:

> The eschatological community did not split off from Judaism as though it were conscious of itself as a new religious society… The decisive step was taken when the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, the coming Judge and agent of redemption, was carried beyond the confines of Palestinian Judaism, and Christian congregations sprang up in the Graeco-Roman world. These congregations consisted partly of Hellenistic Jewish Christians, partly of Gentiles, wherever the Christian sought its point of contact in Hellenistic synagogues. For here, without going farther afield, it was possible to reach many of the Gentiles, who had joined the Jewish community, sometimes closely, sometimes more loosely. On other occasions the Christian missionaries went direct to the Gentile population, and then, in the first instance, to the lower classes in the cities… By and large, the chief differences between Hellenistic Christians and the original Palestinian version was that the former ceased to be dominated by… eschatological expectation… Christian missionary preaching was not only the proclamation of Christ, but, when addressed to a Gentile audience, a preaching of monotheism as well. For this… the natural theology of Stoicism was pressed into service… Thus Hellenistic Christianity is no unitary phenomenon, but taken by and large, a remarkable product of syncretism.[85]

In this description of the development of *Urchristentum*, Jesus's disciples carefully preserved his oral teachings and an eschatological sect of Judaism was founded. Subsequently, communities of other Christians began to manifest

[84] Bultmann, "Primitive Christianity," 209.
[85] Ibid., 209–212.

explosively throughout the lower classes of the ancient Mediterranean, products of the missionizing activity of itinerant preachers and prophets. As these communities emerged, the oral teachings of the original Palestinian *Urchristen* were filtered through Platonic and Stoic philosophical frameworks familiar to the Gentiles. As the Christian movement grew, the eschatological imperative of the earlier and more "authentic" message began to recede into the background. In essence, the urbanization of Christianity led to certain philosophical adaptations of the core, "original" and more authentic Christian message. However, the central inspiration of Jesus's moral philosophy remained. This message, and Jesus's teachings, continued to circulate and develop among these urban communities, mirroring a kind of collective speech that closely resembled the Romantic idea of *Volkspoesie*. In certain cases, the continued growth of Christianity would be attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit was synonymous in many respects to the notion of Romantic *Geist*.

Continuing on with Bultmann's representative model, certain communities sought to record their oral teachings and developing theology either in collections of sayings, like Q, or gospels. For this, they employed an author or redactor, who recorded or incorporated into an account of Jesus's life the teachings that the community held dear. Usually, this writer was imagined to be part of the community itself—perhaps a member of the *ekklēsia* who had enough education to write these oral traditions down. In some cases, thanks in part to the urbanization of Christianity, the gospel writer may have come from a more privileged background and is recognized as well-educated and affluent member of the church. Occasionally even the church itself is imagined to be a community of affluent Christians.[86] In either case, these writings expressed elements of the community's collective experiences and

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[86] For example, on Matthew's "community": "Since the church at Antioch had arisen in the late 30s, it enjoyed the lengthy, continued existence of a Jewish-Christian church necessary to explain the composition of Matthew's gospel. The gospel has behind it a developed scribal tradition and even perhaps a scribal school in which the various forms of the OT texts—including the Septuagint or Old Greek version (see 1:23, 12:21)—were studied and appropriated for proof texts. In such a scholarly milieu, the adaptation and combination of Mark and Q (a collection of Jesus's sayings) may have begun before Matthew set to work. The composition of this lengthy gospel would demand great financial resources as well as great learning. Indeed, some have claimed that internal evidence indicates that Matthew's church was a relatively affluent urban church." (Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, eds., *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 23.)

concerns. Therefore the author acted as a spokesperson or mouthpiece for his fellow Christians, his Volk. Later, in the second-century, the canonical gospels would come to be associated with specific and known urban hubs of Christianity, such as Antioch, Rome, Ephesus and so on.

Bultmann's description of the history of Christianity does not speak for early Christian scholarship *writ large*, but the picture he paints of the social world of *Urchristentum* continues to be prevalent. In particular, the contours of this model of "primitive Christianity" are reinscribed when scholarship persists in imagining the production of early Christian literature in terms of presumed or accepted religious communities, authentic oral traditions and provincial *ekklēsia*. Such models of the first-century are informed in the main by Romantic ideas about the Author-Genius, the inspired oral speech and poetry of the Volk and related constructions that rob agency away from the writers of these texts and reinscribe a mystified idea of Christian beginnings.

We would be well served in the field to continue to engage in projects like Frei's that map the trajectory of scholarship. In so doing, we expose potential biases, like the one I have highlighted here, aiding in our ultimate goal of (re)describing our historical data and the social world of these writers. Frei's conceptual division between "pre-critical" and "critical" readers, therefore, is useful in that, by identifying a shift in intellectual history and hermeneutics, he in fact exposed the extent to which the theological interests of the "pre-critical" reader were preserved, in some measure, by critical scholarship.