

BOOK REVIEW

Walsh, Robyn Faith, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament Within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). xix + 225 pp. Hbk. \$99.99.

Robyn Faith Walsh's *The Origins of Early Christian Literature* may be one of the most intriguing and stimulating volumes published in recent decades. The volume critiques with a keen eye some of the most intimately held convictions and ideas present within New Testament studies, especially regarding the treatment of the Gospels as literary and historical sources, and instead situates them carefully within their Greco-Roman literary context. The present volume will, without a doubt, cause some controversy, but with it hopefully a fruitful reevaluation of the current paradigms in New Testament scholarship.

The volume opens with a keen introduction to the topic at hand, and specifically poses the question of whether academics in New Testament studies have been far too apt to treat the Gospels as exceptional among ancient literature. Walsh notes the 'reifying tradition' issue (p. 5) which pervades the study of religion and in this case seems to acutely affect the study of the Gospels. Instead of reading the Gospels as necessarily religious texts, Walsh seeks to reorient the study of them as Greco-Roman literature, with all the repercussions that come along. She challenges the idea of them being written for a religious community, and instead proposes we are to understand them as writing for other writers. The first chapter of the book covers many of the broken and uncritically accepted assumptions made about Christian origins. Chapter two, and perhaps one of the most indicting of them all, traces how assumptions of oral tradition, the vague 'community', and many other reifying tendencies find their origin in German Romanticism of the nineteenth century, and that modern scholars have failed to properly critique these foundations. The third chapter surveys the environment of Greco-Roman authors, how they were educated, taught to write, etc. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on placing the Gospels in their literary

context: the fourth chapter draws close parallels, for instance, to Greco-Roman novelistic writing traditions and emphasizes the creativeness of the Synoptic authors; the fifth chapter goes into detail on the conceptualization of the Gospels as ancient *bioi* and shows how they fit into a ‘sub-versive biography’ category (p. 170), which had a ‘market’ at the time (p. 171).

This volume is perhaps one of the most challenging—and as a result, exciting—volumes on the Gospels and early Christian literature in recent years. Situating the Gospels within the context of the Greco-Roman literary world and giving us a rather full understanding of what this entails, Walsh’s work leads us to the conclusion that perhaps attempting to see if we can ‘reach behind’ the Gospels to find the historical layers is arguably an exercise in futility and that we should instead look at them within their cultural contexts, rather than as repositories of tradition to be parsed for historical kernels. The challenges which Walsh proposes do on occasion seem not entirely convincing or it seems that Walsh may be in fact keeping some of the old traditions that she has critiqued alive. For instance, Walsh’s usage of the Q document is arguably situated among the same problematic ideals that have led to the modern concretizing tendencies of New Testament scholars, attempting to find some layer of *logia* going back to Jesus, to the point they delve into Q for information. Relevant to this topic would be Burton Mack and attempts to find various layers/strata of the Q document (*The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993]). On the converse, Goodacre and company give us the ability to see even the Q material as the product of the ‘rational agent’ of the authors in question (Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* [Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002]). Much of Walsh’s own discussion on Q (pp. 42-43) in New Testament studies in fact seems to show these same problematic foundations behind it that belie the oral tradition, such as Kloppenborg’s appeal to ‘Q folk’ and attempts to identify community, orality, and ‘itinerancy’ (p. 43). As for me, the hypothetical document Q seems little more justified than the appeal to the oral tradition and community that Walsh criticizes in depth.

I am not as inclined to follow suit with the category of ‘subversive biography’ fitting the Gospels, either. While many of the parallels that Walsh finds are intriguing and worth exploring with other texts of a similar genre, the commonalities that the Gospels share with novels of the time are more convincing to me. The conception of the Gospels as subversive biography is a bit nebulous. Walsh elucidates several potential qualities of this ‘subver-

sive biography', but many of these same elements are found across the more 'civic' types as well. For instance, the trope of an 'outsider' who must prove himself is undercut by Jesus' messianism and Davidic origins. We can parallel this to Romulus, grandson of the king, who was raised by the swineherd Faustulus (see Plutarch, *Romulus* 6). The miracles and such are also paralleled. Romulus and Jesus both are bodily assumed into heaven (more on this below), making heavenly appearances later. Miraculous deeds are also reported for the 'civil tradition of biography' (p. 173), such as Suetonius's description of Vespasian as a miracle worker (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 7). I would classify myself among those who think it seems 'fruitless to seek features that would lead one to be able to classify ancient *bioi* (or *vitae*) more coherently' (p. 173). Perhaps the most convincing element for Walsh's category of subversive biography is the note that these subversive biographies emphasize the wit, virtue, and intelligence of their authors, often via parables, which is something absent from the biographies of Romulus for instance. Even if we accept Walsh's example and identify the Gospels as subversive biography of some kind, much to the chagrin of many scholars today, one will not then find justification for them as repositories of historical information. Instead, ancient biographies were quite fictive and created with intense literary imagination, as Walsh demonstrates. Given Walsh's demonstration of the creativity and fictiveness of ancient Greco-Roman biographies, the attempts by some academics to declare the Gospels as different in their concern for historical accuracy (e.g., Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]) seems to be special pleading, trying to see the Gospels as unique manifestations of the genre. Walsh demonstrates that even if they are biographies, one of their defining characteristics will still be creative and fictive writing on the part of their author.

There are other suggestions within this work which may cause some discontent. For instance, Walsh suggests synoptic reliance on Pauline tradition. This is a suggestion I am inclined to agree with but it is no doubt contentious in current scholarship, and one may ask whether the Synoptics are directly reliant on Paul or on Pauline traditions in wider circulation, which takes us back to the whole oral tradition debate and the Gospel authors as redactors. This also brings up another issue, which is authorship. If we take the Gospel of Luke as an example, Walsh identifies Luke as reliant on Q, Paul, and Mark for his writing. I would also point further to the LXX. Given

we have this vast melding of writings, and in some cases, outright copy-pasting of vast swathes of Mark, we do have the question of whether it makes sense to really talk of Luke as a separate author or as (much to our chagrin) a redactor once again, though not of oral tradition. I would similarly ask this question of the Gospel of John (which I suspect is reliant on Mark and Luke at a minimum). For me, the individuality of authorship and authors become rather nebulous in application to the later Synoptics and John.

Another element that may spark some debate is Walsh's situating the Gospel accounts of the resurrection and empty tomb within the Greco-Roman traditions of similar events (pp. 149-55). Viewing the resurrection as a Greco-Roman trope, for instance, is likely to cause some uproar within the rather pervasive scholarship which has sought to differentiate Jesus' resurrection from all pagan influences and find its roots purely within Jewish beliefs. However, I must question the statement 'The story of a Galilean peasant resurrected like Romulus was also timely' (p. 153). Romulus was not resurrected but translated into the heavens *while still alive* (Plutarch [*Romulus* 27] lists numerous different accounts of Romulus's disappearance). However, despite this, the parallel is still apt and still places Jesus in the line of disappearing notable figures who are raised to the heavens and deified, and in fact I wish that Walsh had emphasized the Romulus parallels more, as they establish more of the 'imperial writing practices' that Walsh contextualizes Mark within (p. 153). In fact, there is a long tradition of the raising up of Caesars and other imperial figures into the heavens where they are deified in general.

Elsewhere, Walsh notes that claims of reliance on 'spurious eyewitnesses' were commonplace in the ancient world as a way to bolster or claim verification, i.e., as a writing strategy. To this we could add how common the practice was even for ancient historians to cite vague and nondescript sources which could not be verified (such as anonymous *auctores* being evoked, such as when Tacitus cites unnamed 'authors' in *Histories* 5.3). This must cause us to seriously question whether any such claims within the Gospels to rely on previous traditions are in fact reliable (p. 156). As a result, we may find that we should go as far as to say that the Gospel authors are engaged in the citational deceptions common among their peers, and not to treat these merely as attestations of a wide variety of sources that were available to them.

The volume is sure to also stir debate among many conservative scholars. The conception that the authors of the Gospels may have invented and fictionalized their accounts, not accurately presented or even used oral traditions, etc., may be taken as a sign that the Gospel authors are in some way being dishonest or even liars. This endangers the 'truth' of the Gospels in some fashion (especially from a more literalist crowd), which in turn will undoubtedly lead to ardent defenses of the Gospels and criticisms of Walsh's work. Much of this will, however, validate Walsh's original points that much of New Testament scholarship is rooted in this German Romanticism and inclination for us to reify our desires about our texts, quite often for theological purposes.

Walsh's intense criticism of the paradigms and assumptions inherent in much of New Testament studies is perhaps going to see some of its greatest effect in challenging the study of the historical Jesus. Historical Jesus studies, without the Gospels as readily available sources, may find that they hit a dead end, but this one more immovable than other roadblocks in the past. The figure we find accessible in the Gospels is a literary figure, who has been constructed by creative agents. Perhaps there are historical kernels in there, but the attempt to sift through the sources to find them is a doomed procedure when we realize that these texts are creative endeavors that fictionalize, rearrange, and construct the narrative they want, and this entire sifting process seems to be an antiquated monument to Romantic preoccupations of the past. We are not dealing with an artifact of communal traditions being passed on, but the creative endeavor of an author, writing for other writers. The intense criticisms of how New Testament studies has functioned up to this point and attempted to concretize modern Christian ideals and many of the agendas places this volume rather comfortably alongside other works which have been pointing out protectionist tendencies within the field and criticizing the taking of these texts on their own terms or repeating their claims, rather than subjecting them to proper scrutiny. Walsh aids us in finding more ways in which the Gospels have been treated as exceptional, and their claims privileged, and she challenges us to think about the assumptions that have long dominated the field.

Though somewhat minor, perhaps one of the more welcome traits of this volume comes with the recent exposure of many problematic figures within biblical scholarship. As such, Walsh makes readers aware that she will be citing scholars and movements that have been convicted of various crimes or are part of a history of antisemitism (p. xix). The move toward ethical ci-

tation practices is welcome, though this may prove controversial to those who deem it necessary to separate the *scholar from the scholarship*. I would like to see ethical citation practices exhibited more widely in biblical studies as a whole, but only time will tell. The volume, on a technical level, does not have many shortcomings though I was a little disappointed by the rather short subject/author index, and lack of any ancient sources index, both of which would have been useful in a work like this, which covers a lot of ground. However, this is minor and not worth quibbling over.

Walsh's arguments and criticisms of the current mainstream scholarship cannot be ignored nor lightly dismissed, as she comes fully prepared with well documented reasons for challenging the presumptions and analyses that have been previously made in this field. Even if one is not persuaded by everything in the volume, it should provoke interest and engagement, and cannot simply be ignored. Scholars of New Testament criticism, historical Jesus studies, and early Christian studies should all carefully read and engage this volume.

Christopher M. Hansen
Saginaw Valley State University
University Center, MI