

The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon¹

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It has been clear for some time that the second century was a (indeed, perhaps *the*) crucial period in the development of the New Testament. The individual writings that comprise the New Testament were all, or nearly all, written across the latter half of the first century; but the second century is the period in which most of them came to hold a special significance, at least for the great majority of Christian circles. Facilitating and reflecting this, the second century was the time when these writings were copied and disseminated widely. It is all the more frustrating, however, that the extant evidence from the period is almost in inverse relation to its importance. Nevertheless, this importance demands and justifies our efforts to take stock of what we can say, and with what confidence, about the New Testament writings in the second century.

In what follows, I make a modest effort toward this end by underscoring three crucial processes in this period, which also constitute three major areas of scholarly inquiry and controversy: (1) the textual transmission of the New Testament writings, (2) the phenomenon of early collections of writings (especially the Gospels and Pauline epistles); and (3) certain writings coming to enjoy a special status, authority, and usage, which seems to be the crucial earlier stage of a process that led eventually to a fixed, closed canon of the New Testament. I shall survey these matters in the light of current scholarly debates and recently available evidence (e.g., the most recent Oxyrhynchus volumes). My aim here is not to provide some definitive treatment of any of the data or the issues,

¹ It is a personal pleasure to offer this essay to Carroll Osburn, with great appreciation for his own scholarly contributions and his collegial manner. An earlier version of this essay was given as an invited presentation in the New Testament Textual Criticism program unit of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 17-20 November 2001, Denver, USA. I particularly acknowledge critical interaction with William L. Petersen then and subsequently in clarifying the discussion of patristic citation of NT writings, though I must take sole responsibility for the views I offer here. James Kelhoffer also kindly read an earlier draft and gave helpful suggestions. [The published version appeared in *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and*

but rather to emphasize the importance of these three processes or dynamics, thereby to help to focus further thinking about them.

Textual Transmission of the New Testament Writings

First, what can we say about the transmission of the text of the NT in the second century? Some scholars emphasize and allege great fluidity and freedom in this period, in some cases so much that the extant manuscripts are alleged to be seriously unreliable for reconstructing the “original” of NT writings, whereas others contend that the manuscript evidence shows sufficient usefulness to encourage this text-critical effort.² Some see the undeniable textual fluidity as indicative that the writings held something considerably less than scriptural significance, whereas others argue that it shows the opposite.

As is reasonably well known, the two main types of evidence that have been used in forming our views of the transmission of New Testament writings in the second century are, first, the extant manuscripts from that time and early centuries thereafter, and, second, the citations/quotations of New Testament writings by second-century Christian authors.³ Let us look briefly at the latest developments in these bodies of evidence.

As for the manuscripts of New Testament writings, there is both bad news and good news. The well-known bad news is that the extant manuscripts that can plausibly be dated to the second

Exegetical Studies, eds. J. W. Childers & D. C. Parker (“Texts and Studies, Third Series,” 4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 3-27.

² Helmut Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 19-37, contends that the second century was completely a period of wild variation until sometime near 200 CE when he proposes that a textual recension was undertaken, from which our extant NT manuscripts all derive. Note also the recent problematizing of the task of reconstructing an “original” text of the New Testament writings: Eldon Jay Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 245-81.

³ See now esp. Barbara Aland, “Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes in den ersten Jahrhunderten,” in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin (BETL 86; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 1-38. Stuart R. Pickering has complained about inadequate attention given to the potential importance of quotations and allusions to passages in NT writings in early papyri: “The Significance of Non-Continuous New Testament Materials in Papyri,” *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts, The Papers of the First Birmingham Colloquium on*

century are lamentably few in number, and none of them gives us a complete text of any New Testament writing. In fact, the extant second-century manuscript evidence consists largely in a handful of incomplete single leaves, though they collectively derive from a number of manuscripts. Even if we accept Skeat's argument that P64, P67 and P4 all represent the same multi-gospel manuscript from the late second century, the amount of text preserved in the total body of second-century manuscript material is still frustratingly small.⁴ The earliest manuscripts that give us substantial portions of texts are dated palaeographically to the early third century or thereabouts. P45 (Gospels and Acts) and P46 (Pauline epistles) date from ca. 200-250 CE, Gospels codices P66 and P75 from ca. 200 CE, P47 (Revelation) ca. 250-300 CE, and P72 (Jude and 1-2 Peter) third to fourth century CE.

Newly Published Manuscripts

On the other hand, the good news is that the small fund of second-century and/or early third-century manuscript witnesses has been enriched with the publication of three recent volumes of the Oxyrhynchus papyri. Volumes 64-66 give us previously unknown New Testament papyrus materials that comprise leaves from seven manuscripts of Matthew, four of John, two of Revelation, and one each of Luke, Acts, Romans, Hebrews, and James, the dates ranging from the second century to the fifth or sixth century CE.⁵ The earliest are leaves of three manuscripts of Matthew

the Textual Criticism of the New Testament, ed. D. G. K. Taylor (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 121-41.

⁴ T. C. Skeat, "The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?" *NTS* 43 (1997): 1-34, reprinted in J. K. Elliott (ed.), *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat* (NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 158-92; also G. N. Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *NTS* 43 (1997): 317-46, reprinted (with light revision) in G. N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 63-91.

⁵ *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (London: British Academy for the Egypt Exploration Society): *Volume LXIV*, ed. E. W. Handley *et al.*, 1997, has POxy 4401-6 (pp. 1-13, ed. J. David Thomas); *Volume LXV*, ed. M. W. Haslam *et al.*, 1998, has POxy 4445-48 (pp. 10-20, ed. W. E. H. Cockle), and POxy 4449 (pp. 20-25, ed. R. Hübner); *Volume LXVI*, ed. N. Gonis *et al.*, 1999, has POxy 4494-95 (pp. 1-5) and POxy 4497-98 (pp. 7-10, ed. W. E. H. Cockle), POxy 4496 (pp. 7-10, ed. Tim Finney), POxy 4499 (pp. 10-35, ed. J. Chapa), and POxy 5000 (ed. W. E. H. Cockle). These comprise a new portion of P77 (P.Oxy 4405 part of the same codex as P.Oxy 2683), and several newly identified manuscripts assigned NT papyri numbers P100-115. Basic information and images on the Oxyrhynchus web site: <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/>. See especially the valuable discussion by Peter M. Head, "Some Recently Published NT Papyri from Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment," *TynBul* 51(2000) 1-16, which includes ample citation of other relevant publications; and J. K.

dated to the second or early third century: P.Oxy. 4405 (a new portion of P77, containing Matt 23:30-34; 35-39, second/third century), P.Oxy. 4403 (P103, Matt 13:55-56; 14:3-5, second/third century), POxy 4404 (P104, Matt 21:34-37, 43 &45, late second century). Prior to the publication of these fragments, per Nestle-Aland 27, the only second-century manuscripts available were the famous P52 (P.Ryl 457, John 18:31-33, 37-38), P90 (P.Oxy 3523, John 18:36-19:1; 19: 2-7), and P98 (P.IFAO 237b, Rev 1:13-20). Even if we add in the recently posited manuscript combination of P4-P64-P67 mentioned already, and grant the proposal that the manuscript dates from the late second century, and if we also add New Testament papyri usually dated ca. 200 CE, such as P66, P75, P46, it is still clear that the very recent Oxyrhynchus fragments add significantly to a very limited body of manuscript material for the second century.

Moreover it is further good news that, although comprising a small amount of the *text* of New Testament writings, these fragments are actually rich with data. From my own (thus far limited) consultation of the relevant Oxyrhynchus volumes and from Peter Head's valuable survey of these fragments, I mention a few illustrative matters. First, though we have in each case only a small sample of the manuscript from which they come, in general these fragments "confirm the text of the great uncials which forms the basis of the modern critical editions."⁶ In the main, they provide us with earlier attestation of variants that we already knew of from later witnesses. In some cases, however, these are variants previously attested only in the versions, which warns us that in a good many other cases as well readings presently supported only in the versions may well reflect very early readings that simply happen not to have survived in the extant Greek witnesses.⁷

Elliott, "Five New Papyri of the New Testament," *N&T* 41(1999) 209-13, reviews the New Testament fragments in Volume 65 of the Oxyrhynchus series, and focuses almost entirely on what readings they contain.

⁶ Head, "Some Recent Published NT Papyri from Oxyrhynchus," 16.

⁷ Perhaps the most significant variant is in P.Oxy 4445 (P106) at John 1:34, ο εκλεκτοί where most witnesses, including P66 and P75 read ο υιοί. P106 here gives early support for a reading found also in Sinaiticus (original hand), later minuscules (77, 218), Old Latin manuscripts (b, e, ff²), and the Old Syriac (syr^s c). See Head, "Some Recently Published NT Papyri," 11.

But the larger point is that these fragments further encourage us to think that the more substantial witnesses from the third century and later are (*contra* Koester) probably not the results of some supposed major recension of New Testament writings initiated toward the end of the second century.⁸ Instead, the Oxyrhynchus fragments further justify the view that the more substantial early third-century papyri are reliable witnesses of the text of the writings that they contain, as these writings had been transmitted across the second century.

Second, these fragments also reinforce the impression given by the New Testament papyri from 200 CE and a bit later that there were *varying* scribal tendencies operative in the textual transmission of the New Testament in the second century.⁹ That is, the recently-published evidence is consistent with the view that the second century was a time of somewhat diverse textual dynamics. To quote from Head's survey, the fragments "illustrate various points along the spectrum from more controlled texts (with corrections, literary features, etc.) to comparatively more free or careless copying."¹⁰ We are thereby further warned against over-simplifications about the textual transmission of New Testament writings in the second century. Instead, with enhanced confidence we may take up Epp's proposal that the early New Testament papyri can be placed in several early "clusters" or "textual groups," and that these represent different "textual complexions" already operative in the second century. Some of the newly published fragments reflect a concern for "a high degree of accuracy," and others indicate a freer readiness to adapt the text, exhibited especially

⁸ Helmut Koester, "The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century," in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 19-37.

⁹ See esp. James R. Royse, "Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri," (ThD diss, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1981); *id.*, "Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, eds. Bart D. Ehrman, Michael W. Holmes (SD46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239-52.

¹⁰ Head, "Some Recently Published NT Papyri," 10.

in stylistic changes, harmonizations, higher numbers of accidental changes, and even occasional changes motivated by doctrinal concerns.¹¹

To avoid misunderstanding in this controversial matter, I emphasize my point. I do not deny at all that there was (perhaps considerable) fluidity in the transmission of the New Testament writings in the second century.¹² I simply stress that along with a readiness of some (perhaps even most) scribes to introduce variants intended to harmonize the Gospels, remove ambiguities, affirm doctrinal concerns, and even introduce new material intended as edifying, in at least some circles there also appears to have been a somewhat more conservative copying attitude.

In addition to their readings, however, the small but fascinating body of early papyri gives us other valuable evidence that should not be overlooked. New Testament scholars, including text critics, have tended to comb early manuscripts for readings; but we also must learn to harvest the fuller and more diverse data that lie in these valuable artefacts.¹³ For example, the *corrections* in P.Oxy 4403 (P103) and P.Oxy 4405 (P77) are noteworthy. The quality of the hands suggests that these manuscripts were not produced by professional calligraphers such as those who produced expensive copies of literary texts. Nevertheless, along with some other features, these corrections reflect the sort of *mentality* (though not the fully developed scribal skills) that we associate with a scriptorium. In particular, the corrections show a concern for what those correcting the copies regarded as accurate copying. Of course, we must be careful to avoid anachronism in positing too confidently formal

¹¹ E. J. Epp, "The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission," in E. J. Epp, Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 274-97. See the somewhat similar categories proposed by Aland, "Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes," 26-27.

¹² The so-called "Western text" is perhaps the most striking expression of the fluidity in textual transmission in this early period. But it appears that the "Western text" is probably more a body of readings produced by somewhat similar scribal tendencies, rather than a cohesive recension. For a recent study, see, W. A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts* (SNTSMS 71; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹³ Günther Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1953), is a classic study of P46 that demonstrates a fuller use of the data available in the early papyri. Among studies of the major codices, D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), is a model.

scriptoria early in the second century, at least in the sense of the sort of physical settings in which multiple copies of Christian writings were prepared in later centuries.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are various indications that the copying of early Christian texts in the second century involved emergent scribal conventions that quickly obtained impressive influence, and, at least in some cases and settings, that there was a concern for careful copying.¹⁵

To cite one particular matter, where these new fragments preserve the words known to us as *nomina sacra*, particularly the four words Θεος, Κυριος, Χριστος, and Ιησους, these words are written in the sorts of abbreviated forms that we already know from other ancient Christian manuscripts.¹⁶ The minor variations in the precise spelling of the abbreviations do not rightly count against the conclusion that there was a widely attested convention among Christian scribes that certain religiously “loaded” words were to be written in a distinctive manner.¹⁷ In so far as earliest Christian manuscripts were not copied by “professional” scribes (or at least often do not exhibit the kind of calligraphy more characteristic of professionally produced literary manuscripts of the period), such widespread and distinctive scribal conventions are all the more notable.

It is also significant that all of these fragments come from codices. Thus, they collectively reinforce the conclusions drawn from previously known evidence that, by sometime early in the second century at the latest, Christians overwhelmingly had come to prefer the codex, especially, it

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995), 120-23; Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83-91. Part of the difficulty in the issue is that scholars are not always clear as to what they mean by “scriptorium.”

¹⁵ See, e.g., Zuntz, esp. 263-83.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, the fragments dated to the second century (P.Oxy 4405/P77; P.Oxy 4403/P.103; and P.Oxy 4404/P104) do not preserve portions of text where the words in question would have occurred. But newly published third-century fragments do: P.Oxy 4449 (P100), P.Oxy 4401 (P101), P.Oxy 4445 (P 106), P.Oxy 4447 (P108), P.Oxy 4495 (P111), P.Oxy 4497 (P113), P.Oxy 4498 (P114), P.Oxy 4499 (P115). See the table of features in Head, “Some Recently Published NT Papyri,” 5. On the *nomina sacra*, see esp. Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt, The Schweich Lectures 1977* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1979), 26-48; and now Larry W. Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 655-73, for a full discussion and bibliographic references.

¹⁷ Thus, I do not find Haines-Eitzen’s effort to minimize the significance of the *nomina sacra* persuasive: cf. *Guardians of Letters*, 91-96.

appears, for their scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian writings that were coming to be treated widely as scripture.¹⁸ The only extant examples of Christian texts written on unused rolls (as distinguished from re-used rolls, “opisthographs”) are theological tractates (e.g., Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*), and writings that may have been regarded as edifying in some circles but did not gain acceptance as part of the emergent New Testament canon.¹⁹

These new Oxyrhynchus fragments of New Testament writings also exhibit various aids to reading, such as rough-breathing marks, punctuation, and, a matter of particular significance, occasional spacing at the ends of sentences and perhaps paragraphs.²⁰ These readers-aids are very unusual for literary texts of the period, but there are some similarities to pre-Christian Jewish manuscripts of the Old Testament writings (e.g., P.Ryl 458). The most cogent inference is that the Christian manuscripts with these various scribal devices were prepared for ease of *public* reading in churches. That is, these small fragments probably give us further important artefactual evidence confirming second-century reports (e.g., Justin Martyr) of the liturgical practice of reading these New Testament writings.²¹ Though inadequately noticed, such evidence was already provided in previously available fragments such as the famous fragment of the Gospel of John, P52 (P.Ryl 457),

¹⁸ Cf. P.Oxy 4443, a fragment of Greek Esther dated to the late first or early second century C.E., a roll (“a luxurious copy”), and with at least one occurrence of an uncontracted qeoj (plus two other cases proposed for lacunae), which rightly led the editors to assign the manuscript to a Jewish provenance (*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Volume LXV*, ed. M. W. Haslam, 4). Cf. also, e.g., the Oxyrhynchus manuscripts of *Gospel of Thomas*, one of which is a codex (P.Oxy 1), and the other two (P.Oxy 654 and 655) rolls, one of these (P.Oxy. 654) an opisthograph written on the reverse side of a land register.

¹⁹ E.g., P.Oxy 3405 (van Haelst 671) is a late second or early third-century roll of Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, as is the fourth-century copy, van Haelst 672. The Fayoum fragment (P.Vindob. G. 2325; van Haelst 589) is a roll. P.Oxy 654 (van Haelst 593) is an opisthograph, but P.Oxy 655 (van Haelst 595) is another copy of *Gospel of Thomas* written on a fresh roll. P.Mich 130 (van Haelst 657) is a late second-century opisthograph of *Shepherd of Hermas*, whereas P.Berlin inv. 5513 (van Haelst 662, third-century) is another copy of *Hermas* on a roll.

²⁰ Again, I refer to the table in Head, “Some Recently Published NT Papyri,” 5. Further details are given in the relevant Oxyrhynchus volumes. See also Eldon Jay Epp, “The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus in their Social and Intellectual Context,” in *Sayings of Jesus: canonical and Non-Canonical, Essays in Honour of Tjitze Baarda*, ed. William L. Petersen, Johan S. Vos, Henk J. de Jonge (NovTSup 89; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47-68 (and Epp’s “Appended Note” which appears in offprints of his essay and takes account of Oxyrhynchus volumes that appeared after the essay was written).

²¹ See, e.g., Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 205-8, 211-31.

which exhibits diuresis and curious spaces that seem to register clauses, places where the “public” readers were probably intended to make small pauses.²²

It is an unfortunate weakness in Kim Haines-Eitzen’s recent (and in a number of other matters, very helpful) study of early Christian scribal practice that she rather too simply assumes the general literary practice of making private copies for personal usage as the operative setting and model for the production of all early Christian manuscripts. I think that she gives inadequate attention to strong indications that a good many Christian manuscripts were prepared for *groups* and for reading out as liturgical texts.²³ In the following paragraphs, I cite briefly the important matters.

Already by the date of our earliest extant evidence, Christians had come to prefer a distinguishable book-form (the codex) over against the wider preference of their culture for the book-roll. The Christian preference for the codex seems to have been especially strong in copying their most revered writings, those that were regarded as scripture and/or were coming to be so regarded. As we have noted, Christians also developed distinctive scribal practices, among which the *nomina sacra* are the most striking, but including also the richer use of punctuation and spacing. They read texts, not simply privately or in the sort of reading circles of the cultured elite, but also, very importantly and characteristically, as a regular part of their liturgical practice and thus as a feature of their gathered worship. In this they differed from the literary and religious practices of the larger culture. Reading texts does not typically feature in cultic practices/settings, and, in any case, literary texts did not get this kind of usage. The only precedent and analogy for the early Christian religious usage of texts was in the reading of scripture as part of Jewish synagogue practice. All this cumulatively signals what must be seen as the emergence of an identifiably and somewhat distinctive

²² Diuresis in recto lines 1 and 2, and verso line 2; spacing recto lines 2 and 3, and verso line 2. C. H. Roberts commented on the spacing he found in P.Ryl 458 (Greek Deuteronomy, second century BCE) at the ends of sentences or clauses and groups of words, noting how unusual such spacing was, and also that a similar system might be identified in P52 (“Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester,” *BJRL* 20[1936] 219-36, esp. 226-27).

²³ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*. For a broader and more fully nuanced treatment of the production and use of early Christian texts, see esp. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*.

Christian literary ethos. Indeed, in an essay in the recent Peter Richardson *Festschrift* I have proposed that the early Christian manuscripts offer us our earliest indications of an emergent Christian “material culture.”²⁴

The reason I underscore these matters is that there is increasing recognition that the repeated liturgical reading of New Testament writings is an important factor *in the textual transmission* of these texts. It certainly helps to account for the obviously frequent copying and wide dissemination of these writings, which goes far beyond anything else in antiquity. Furthermore, liturgical usage is one of the factors that would have helped to prompt the sort of small stylistic “improvements” intended to make texts clearer and easier to understand that are so well known in Christian manuscripts. The regular liturgical reading of the four canonical Gospels also helps to account for the abundance of harmonizing variants, especially frequent in Mark.

But repeated public reading of New Testament writings would also have set real limits on how much a writing could be changed, at least in a given circle, without people noticing (and probably objecting), as anyone familiar with what happens when liturgical changes are introduced can attest. It is, thus, likely not a coincidence that Mark, which appears to have been the least widely and frequently used in liturgical reading, also exhibits the largest number and the most salient variations (especially, of course, the several endings). By contrast, the most widely used Gospel, Matthew, has probably the most stable and fixed text.

That is, the practice of *repeated* liturgical reading of New Testament writings is yet another factor that ought to lead us to hesitate to characterize the second century as basically a period of “wild” textual tendencies. Along with the surprisingly well-attested preference for the codex and the ubiquitous scribal treatment of the *nomina sacra*, the practice of liturgical reading of writings provides

²⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, “The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the *Nomina Sacra* and the Staurogram,” in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, eds. Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 271-88.

us with indications of conventionalization of practice with regard to these writings at a chronological stage of early Christianity to which we are otherwise accustomed to attributing great diversity.

It is certainly the case, however, that we have not adequately mined all that is provided to us in the early papyri, whether those that have been known for some time or those newly published. There are some valuable research projects here. For example, Harry Sanders noticed long ago that Codex W (the four Gospels) exhibited a system of spacing of sense-units that corresponded with versional evidence, and proposed that this might reflect “an ancient system of phrasing, used in reading the Scriptures in church service,” whose origin “must have been as early as the second century.”²⁵ The spacing found in early papyri that have appeared subsequently seems to support Sanders’ suggestion. Already in the second century there appears to have been an embryonic system of subdivision of the texts of the gospels that probably reflected and supported the practice of gospel readings as part of Christian worship gatherings.²⁶ But it remains for us to mine the relevant material on this and other intriguing matters. Prospective doctoral students, take note!²⁷

Second-Century Citations

The other major body of data that has often been taken as giving evidence about the transmission of the New Testament writings in the second century are the citations/quotations in second-century Christian writers.²⁸ In very basic terms, examination of second-century Christian writers indicates

²⁵ H. A. Sanders, *The New Testament Manuscripts in the Freer Collection, Part I, The Washington Manuscript of the Four Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 14.

²⁶ See further Victor Martin’s discussion of spacing signalling subdivisions in P66: *Papyrus Bodmer II, Evangile de Jean chap. 1-14* (Cologny-Genève: Bibliothèque Bodmer, 1956), 18-21.

²⁷ Note the new series, “Pericope: Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity,” established in 2000, and published by Van Gorcum (Assen, Netherlands) under the editorship of Marjo Korpel (Utrecht) *et alia*, which focuses on scribal “unit delimitation” in biblical manuscripts (Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, Latin).

²⁸ Studies include Donald A. Hagner, “The Sayings of Jesus in the Apostolic Fathers and Justin Martyr,” in *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 233-68; A Committee of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology, *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905); Helmut Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (TU 65; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957); Edouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of St. Matthew on Christian Literature Before St. Irenaeus. Part 1. The First Ecclesiastical Writers* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990); Arthur J.

few explicit citations of New Testament writings; and, where it is clear or highly likely that a New Testament writing is quoted, the quotation often exhibits curious differences from the text of the writing that is dominant in the extant manuscripts.

To be a bit more precise, these things tend to be comparatively more characteristic of Christian writers of the first half of the second century. Noting this, Barbara Aland has proposed that in the latter half of the second century we see the emergence of a “text-consciousness” that is reflected in a more frequently explicit (named) and exact citation of New Testament writings. This increased “text-consciousness,” she proposes further, may have developed as a result of two major processes: (1) second-century controversies over Christian faith that involved questions about the wording of texts (e.g., Marcion), and (2) the prolonged effect of repeated liturgical reading of certain texts.²⁹

As noted earlier, Koester, and William Petersen also, in particular have argued that the loose and fluid wording of the quotations of New Testament writings in early second-century authors means that the text of New Testament writings was then considerably more fluid than is reflected in the extant manuscripts.³⁰ Indeed, they have contended that the evidence of the early citations should be preferred over the extant manuscripts of the New Testament writings in characterizing their textual transmission in the second century. But, as Barbara Aland complained in her 1989 essay, the analysis of second-century Christian citations has tended too much to proceed with insufficient attention to the wider literary practices of the time.³¹ That is, the import of the citation practices

Bellinzoni, “The Gospel of Matthew in the Second Century,” *SecCent* 9 (1992): 197-258; *id.*, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr* (NovTSup 17; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

²⁹ Aland, “Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes,” 5-21.

³⁰ Koester, “The Text of the Gospels in the Second Century”; William L. Petersen, “What Text Can New Testament Textual Criticism Ultimately Reach?” in *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis and Church History: A Discussion of Methods*, ed. Barbara Aland, J. Delobel (Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1994), 136-52; *id.*, “The Genesis of the Gospels,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. A. Denaux (Louvain: Peeters, forthcoming).

³¹ Barbara Aland, “Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes,” 2-3.

reflected in early second-century Christian authors may not be as obvious or as decisive as has sometimes been assumed.

We still do not have the thorough-going “history of citation in antiquity” that Eduard Norden urged long ago.³² But we do have Christopher Stanley’s recent, valuable study of the citations of Old Testament writings in Paul, in which Stanley includes a comparative analysis of the citation of sources in selected early Roman-era pagan writers and in Jewish writings of the period.³³ Stanley shows that in Jewish, pagan and Christian writers of the time, the citation of known written sources is impressively free and adaptive. Writers omit words, phrases and whole lines that they deem superfluous or problematic for their own rhetorical aims; and they also add or substitute words and phrases to serve as “interpretive renditions” of the material cited, making the material fit more closely with the context of the text in which the citation is appropriated. Likewise, authors frequently combine and conflate material from different contexts of a cited work and/or from different works. So, in general, the citation practices and techniques that we can observe in the early second-century Christian writers are not very different from the flexible treatment of written sources in the New Testament and in the broader literary culture of the time.

That the wording of these citations is often not attested in any of the extant copies of the cited works suggests that authors exercised a certain freedom in amending what they cited. The differences between citations and the texts of the sources cited often seem to be, not simply the products of imprecise memory, but instead deliberate, sometimes artful adaptations. Moreover, the confidence with which authors made these adaptations of widely-known sources suggests that they wrote for readers who accepted such freedom as a legitimate convention in the literary culture of the time. That is, readers familiar with the sources being cited would likely have recognized the

³² Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958), 1:88-90.

³³ Christopher D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature* (SNTSMS 74; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See esp. “Citation Technique in Greco-Roman Literature” (267-91), and “Citation Technique in Early Judaism” (292-337).

adaptations. They would have objected to them only if they dissented from the point being made by the author doing the citation.

Moreover, Stanley cogently observed that it is over-simplified to imagine that ancient authors only either cited a work open before them or else worked from memory or “oral tradition.” There is impressive evidence, particularly the use of combined and conflate citations, to suggest that authors often worked from written compilations of excerpts from one or more sources, these compilations probably arranged topically. Furthermore, Stanley proposes that the alterations that we see in the cited material may often have been made at the point of making the excerpt. That is, authors likely combed relevant sources looking for excerpts on some topic and/or in search of support for some point that they wished to make. And, given that the literary culture of the day fully permitted adaptation of cited material, authors would likely have adapted what they excerpted, at the point of compiling excerpts, much in the way researchers today often combine cited material and their own observations in their notes.

But was there a fully commensurate freedom in the *copying* of these writings? To be sure, the extant evidence for the writings cited, whether Greek classics, Old Testament, or New Testament writings, indicates sometimes impressive fluidity, especially in early stages of the textual transmission of these writings.³⁴ But, with a few notable exceptions, the fluidity evidenced in extant manuscripts does not really match the extent of the variations that we see in the citations of these works in the authors of the early Roman period. This all means that we should probably think of the copying of texts and the citation of them as somewhat distinguishable processes with distinguishable sets of

³⁴ Stanley cites Stephanie West, *Ptolemaic Papyri of Homer* (Papyrologica Coloniensis 3; Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1967) on the “highly fluid” state of Homeric epics till they were standardized in mid-second century BCE (West, 5-14). Also Qumran studies, e.g., Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Textual Study of the Bible-- A New Outlook,” *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*, ed. F. M. Cross, S. Talmon, 321-400 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, 1975); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. 155-98, show an interesting diversity in the text of the Old Testament writings in the pre-Mishnaic period.

conventions. It follows, thus, that it is dubious to take the form of citations as direct evidence of the state of the texts being cited.

To come to the point relevant here, I suggest that it is almost certainly dubious to play off and privilege citations over against our early manuscript evidence for the New Testament writings. Though they are frustratingly fragmentary, our earliest manuscripts come from within decades of the dates of the early second-century patristic writers (e.g., Justin), and our more substantial manuscripts are roughly contemporary with, or even earlier than, patristic writers of the third century and later. We must reckon with all the relevant evidence in characterizing the transmission of texts in second-century Christianity.

A similar cautionary note was sounded several decades ago by Bruce Metzger, who advised that in dealing with patristic citations of the New Testament that differ from the textual readings in extant manuscripts “the textual critic must consider whether it was the Father or the scribe of an early copy of the New Testament who was more likely to alter the text.”³⁵ Subsequently, Gordon Fee also demonstrated problems in the use of Patristic citations for recovering the New Testament text of their times and locales. Fee showed that Patristic authors can cite the New Testament rather freely, especially in sermons and related writings, whereas in commentaries they adhere more to the wording of the manuscripts available to them.³⁶ If, Patristic writers so freely adapted the text of New Testament writings in citations, well after the New Testament writings had acquired unquestionably scriptural status and their text was fairly stable, we are warned about taking citations in the writings of second-century authors as direct evidence of the state of the text in their time.

³⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, “Patristic Evidence and the Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” in *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 167-88 (quotation from p. 183).

³⁶ Gordon D. Fee, “The Text of John in *The Jerusalem Bible*: A Critique of the Use of Patristic Citations in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 335-43 [originally published in *JBL* 90(1971) 163-73].

On the other hand, we should certainly not ignore patristic citations. In a number of cases they appear to preserve variants otherwise attested only lightly in Greek manuscripts or versions. Therefore, in other cases also where the extant evidence does not allow us to verify matters we may suspect that this is so. Clearly, there was fluidity, sometimes considerable, in the way that the text of New Testament writings was handled in the second century. All the same, we should not disregard the other indications that among the scribal tendencies of the time there was also, in some cases, a recognizable concern to copy relatively carefully and faithfully.³⁷

But there is a good deal more to be said about what the citations of New Testament writings in second-century authors tell us. My comments here are not intended to pronounce with finality, only to give reason to recognize that previous analyses are not adequate, and to underscore some important questions and issues for further research.³⁸

Collections

It is a well-known feature of second-century Christianity that *collections* of writings that came to be part of the New Testament were formed and circulated. We know that at some point the four canonical Gospels came to be thought of as complementary renditions of the gospel story of Jesus, and came to form a closed circle enjoying distinctive regard in many Christian circles. We know also that collections of Pauline epistles were circulating, probably from the late first century, and were likewise treated as scripture in at least some circles.³⁹ These phenomena are regularly and rightly noted in histories of the New Testament canon. But I propose that these collections constitute a

³⁷ Note, e.g., the judgment by J. Neville Birdsall in his study of the text of Luke in P75 and P66, "Rational Eclecticism and the Oldest Manuscripts: A Comparative Study of the Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri of the Gospel of Luke," *Studies in New Testament Language and Text. Essays in Honour of George D. Kilpatrick on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (NovTSup 44; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 39-51.

³⁸ See also James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (WUNT 2/112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), esp. 123-30, in critique of Koester's methods in assessing use/influence of written sources in second-century writers.

curious and possibly more significant phenomenon than is reflected in the attention usually given to it in scholarly studies. To be sure, these collections contributed to the larger collection that we know as the New Testament canon. But, well before there was a “New Testament” canon or the debates about what it comprised, what was the motivation for establishing such *collections* of writings, and what function(s) were these collections intended to serve?

It is remarkable how early these collections of writings appear. Several recent studies agree in pushing back the likely origin of a four-fold Gospels collection to the earliest years of the second century. This scholarly agreement is all the more interesting in that these studies pursue different approaches and questions. Theo Heckel argues that the crucial factor was the production of the familiar form of the Gospel of John in Johannine circles, and Heckel places a four-fold Gospel collection sometime around 120 CE.⁴⁰ In an astonishingly detailed study of the long ending of Mark, James Kelhoffer argues (persuasively to my mind) that these verses were composed sometime in the first half of the second century, “with confidence,” he judges, ca. 120-150 CE, and that they presuppose a four-fold Gospel collection that had been circulating and given “high respect” for some time previously.⁴¹ In a recent study proposing identification of a further fragment of Papias’s comments about the Gospels preserved in Eusebius, Charles Hill contends that Papias knew the four canonical Gospels as a collection sometime ca. 125-135 CE.⁴² In a recent book Martin Hengel has weighed in strongly in support of an early fourfold Gospel collection as well.⁴³ But perhaps the most programmatic sketch of the case for an early fourfold Gospel collection has been offered by Graham

³⁹ See, e.g., Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 99-101.

⁴⁰ Theo K. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium* (WUNT 120; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999). See the review by David C. Parker, *JTS* 52(2001): 297-301. Cf. the review by Kari Syreeni in *Review of Biblical Literature* (<http://www.bookreviews.org/Reviews/3161471997.html>).

⁴¹ Kelhoffer, esp. 175, and 154-56, 158 (n. 4).

⁴² Charles E. Hill, “What Papias said about John (and Luke): A ‘New’ Papias Fragment,” *JTS* 49(1998): 582-629, esp. 616-17.

⁴³ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

Stanton in his 1996 SNTS Presidential Address.⁴⁴ Working chronologically backwards from Irenaeus, Stanton concludes that a four-fold Gospel collection was being promoted from sometime shortly after 100 CE, though it took time to win its well-known supremacy.

We can also note slightly earlier studies, in particular Bellinzoni's careful analysis of Justin's use of Jesus' sayings.⁴⁵ He showed that Justin likely used compilations of Jesus' sayings drawn from the written Gospels, almost certainly the three Synoptic Gospels. But Justin's reference to the liturgical reading of memoirs of "apostles and those who followed them" (*Dial.* 103.8) suggests strongly that he knew of at least two Gospels attributed to apostles and at least two attributed to others. The most likely conclusion is that Justin refers to our four canonical Gospels as regularly read in worship.

As for a collection of Pauline epistles, the evidence points back at least as early. Indeed, David Trobisch has proposed that Paul himself may have compiled the first collection of his own epistles.⁴⁶ The reference to "all" Paul's epistles in 2 Peter 3:16 probably takes us back to sometime ca. 100 CE or earlier, although it is impossible to say what the "all" comprised. For, as Gamble notes, it appears that the second-century Pauline collections were of varying dimensions, comprising ten, thirteen, or fourteen letters.⁴⁷ Marcion's exclusive claims for his ten-letter Pauline collection sometime around 140 CE probably presupposes a widespread circulation of Pauline letter-collections already by that point. By ca. 200 CE, however, there was an "*apostolikon*" category of Christian

⁴⁴ Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel".

⁴⁵ Arthur J. Bellinzoni, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr* (NovTSup 17; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967). See also Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 360-402.

⁴⁶ David Trobisch, *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung: Studien zu den Anfängen christlicher Publizistik* (NTOA 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

⁴⁷ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 59-63, 100. On the impact of Paul, see esp. Andreas Lindemann, "Der Apostel Paulus im 2. Jahrhundert," in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin (BETL 86; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 39-67; *id.*, *Paulus im ältesten Christentum. Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1979).

scriptures, comprising a Pauline collection plus letters attributed to other apostolic figures (esp. 1-2 John, 1 Peter, James).

In a sense, then, the New Testament is a collection of prior collections. David Trobisch has proposed vigorously that the New Testament as we know it was compiled as a single editorial project sometime in the mid-second century.⁴⁸ His argument is most intriguing in pointing to passages in various New Testament writings that could be seen as intended to cross-reference to, and accredit, other New Testament writings. I am not persuaded that a full New Testament collection such as later came to be preferred was compiled and circulating as early as Trobisch contends. But it may well be that the compilation of early collections of texts, such as a four-fold Gospel and a Pauline letter-collection, did stimulate the composition of other texts and helped to shape their contents, including the embedding of the sorts of intriguing references that Trobisch highlights.

Collections also probably had an effect upon the transmission of the text of the component writings. The most dramatic demonstration is, of course, Tatian's *Diatessaron* (ca. 172 CE), a thorough adaptation and expansion of earlier harmonizing texts (such as may have been used by Justin).⁴⁹ It appears that one of Tatian's added features was a full use of John. I am not persuaded that the few bits of material not paralleled in the extant texts of the canonical gospels is sufficient for the claim that Marcion used any fifth gospel writing.

The "long ending of Mark," as Kelhoffer has powerfully argued, is another striking textual phenomenon reflecting the four-fold Gospel collection. This early addition to Mark appears to draw upon the four canonical Gospels, and no other gospel writing. It shows, too, that the four canonical

⁴⁸ David Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments. Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); English translation: *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ See William Petersen, "Tatian's Diatessaron," in Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 403-30. But I am not so persuaded as Petersen that the Diatessaron incorporated written sources other than the four canonical Gospels. Cf., e.g., Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 24-26. The oft-cited Dura fragment is not so clearly a piece of the Diatessaron as scholars have tended to think. Cf. now D. C. Parker, D. G. K. Taylor and M. S. Goodacre, "The Dura-Europos Gospel Harmony," in *Studies in the Early Text of the Gospels and Acts*, ed. D.

Gospels were not only collected but also compared with one another, which explains best why someone thought that Mark's ending was deficient and needed to be augmented along the lines of the other Gospels.⁵⁰

In numerous smaller variants as well, we can probably see the effects of a four-fold Gospels collection, especially the many harmonizations of one Gospel to another that I have already mentioned. Clearly, the special recognition given to the four Gospels did not necessarily involve a reluctance to make such "improvements" to their texts.

Of course, it is often thought that the Pauline letters exhibit significant evidence of the effects of circulating in/as a collection. If, as it widely thought, 2 Corinthians is a composite writing, might this composition have taken place in some connection with an early Pauline collection? But a collection could dispose some toward shortening texts too. Gamble has argued that a fifteen-chapter version of Romans (and perhaps a fourteen-chapter version as well) was prepared with a view toward wide ecclesiastical circulation, and a Pauline letter collection is the most likely vehicle for this.⁵¹ He has also noted evidence suggesting "an early, certainly first-century, effort to overcome the problem [of the particularity of Paul's letter-destinations] by deleting or generalizing the addresses of some of the letters and sometimes by omitting other locally specific matter as well . . ."⁵²

The larger question, however, is why such collections emerged at all and became so successfully used. Other letter-collections are a known literary phenomenon in Roman-era antiquity, both in Christian (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch) and pagan circles. A Pauline letter-collection is, thus, not

G. K. Taylor (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 192-228.

⁵⁰ Kelhoffer, 154-55.

⁵¹ Harry Y. Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (SD 42; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977).

⁵² Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 60.

without precedent, though it is still a remarkable development, and perhaps a precedent-setting phenomenon for Christians of the early centuries.⁵³

But why did a four-Gospel collection emerge so early and manage to have such success? It is obvious that there were concerns about a plural and somewhat divergent testimony about Jesus.⁵⁴ Marcion is the most blatant illustration. But the harmonies, especially Tatian's *Diatessaron*, also indicate a certain discomfort with four discrete accounts and in some circles a preference for a more cohesive rendition of Jesus. Why, in particular, did Mark obtain a continuing place in the Gospels collection, when in the eyes of many Christians in the second century Matthew seemed to have superseded it so adequately? Collections of Pauline letters circulating by the late first century might be cited as a precedent and stimulus. But a Pauline letter collection represents one apostolic voice, whereas a collection of Gospels, even the recognizably similar canonical four, embodies a diversity of voices and contents.

Trobisch is probably right to see in the four-fold Gospel an early and deliberately “ecumenical” move. Likewise, the inclusion of letters attributed to various apostles in what became the New Testament *apostolikon* represents a deliberate effort to express and affirm a certain diversity or breadth in what is treated as authoritative.⁵⁵

Canon

The final phenomenon to consider briefly is the emergence of a New Testament canon, which likewise appears to be well on its way by the end of the second century. We can, thus, look to the

⁵³ David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 170-72, refers to collections of letters of Aristotle, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Apollonius of Tyana, Libanius, Cicero, Pliny the Younger, and the senior Pliny.

⁵⁴ Oscar Cullmann, “The Plurality of the Gospels As a Theological Problem in Antiquity,” in Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Westminster, 1956), 39-54; Helmut Merkel, *Die Pluralität der Evangelien als theologisches und exegetisches Problem in der alten Kirche* (Traditio Christiana 3. Bern/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978); *id.*, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien. Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin* (WUNT 13; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971).

⁵⁵ Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments*, 158-60.

second century as the period of the key impetus and “proto-canonical” developments. In the interests of limited space, I shall simply mention some key matters.

Above all, we again must reckon with the practice of liturgical reading. As we know, those writings that contended for acceptance in the canonical decision-making attested in writings from ca. 180 CE onward were those that had already enjoyed widespread inclusion among the texts read in Christian worship gatherings. Those that “made it” the most quickly were those that had the widest usage from the earliest years, and the remaining questions about the rest were settled largely on the basis of whether they had been accepted for liturgical reading sufficiently widely.

The earliest precedent and impetus disposing Christian circles to include writings of their own for such liturgical usage was almost certainly the letters of Paul. They were composed as liturgical texts, to be read out in the gathered assemblies to whom they were originally sent, and were “kitted out” with liturgical expressions to make them fit this setting more readily, especially the well-known letter opening and closing expressions. Moreover, if Colossians is a deutero-Pauline composition, it nevertheless shows that the exchange of Paul’s letters among churches began within the years following his execution (4:16); and, if it is an authentic letter of Paul’s, then the practice was earlier still.

As I have indicated already, it appears also that the Gospels that became canonical circulated impressively widely and early. That Mark was used so thoroughly as source and model by the authors of Matthew and Luke shows that Mark circulated influentially in various Christian circles within a short period after its composition. Thereafter, at least to judge from the comparatively greater number of early copies extant, it appears that Matthew outstripped all the others in breadth of usage and frequency of copying. But John too appears to have enjoyed impressive success very early. Heracleon’s commentary, written sometime ca. 150-175 CE suggests that John had for some time enjoyed scriptural significance in at least some circles. (It is noteworthy that we have no such commentary on any Christian writing that did not come to form part of the New Testament.)

The various early public-readers aids mentioned earlier as characterizing copies of New Testament writings already in the early second century reflect their usage as liturgical texts. Again, the closest pre-Christian precedents and analogies for these scribal features are found in Jewish copies of Old Testament scriptural writings that came to be included in the closed canon of Judaism.⁵⁶

All this early interest in the public reading of certain writings as part of the liturgical life of Christian groups suggests that we might need to re-think the view that it was only in the later decades of the second century that a “text consciousness” came to be influential. We have, perhaps, somewhat romantically regarded the earliest Christian circles as so given to oral tradition that their writings took a distant second place in their values. I submit that from the earliest observable years Christianity was a profoundly *textual* movement.

To cite an early indication, although Paul was an intrepid itinerant preacher, and characterized himself primarily as such (Rom 15:17-21), even in his own lifetime his critics referred to the effects of his *letters* (2 Cor 10:9-11). The production of the deutero-Pauline letters and, indeed, the larger production of pseudonymous letters as well, attest that writings were early an influential mode of Christian discourse, persuasion, and promotion of religious ideas. The reference to “the books and above all the parchments” in 2 Timothy 4:13 shows how much Paul was associated with texts in the subsequent circles that revered him. John of Patmos conveyed his colorful visions and words in a *text*, which he clothed in prophetic authority and for which he demanded respectful reading and copying (Rev 21:18-19).

The production of multiple written renditions of Jesus in the first century and onward shows also that texts were an early and favored mode for transmitting traditions about him. Even earlier than the canonical Gospels, the Q sayings-source illustrates this as well. The continuing proliferation of “gospels” beyond the four that became canonical was apparently already well under way in the

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 208-17, on scribal practices that can be traced back to pre-

second century, and further shows how given to texts early Christian were for circulating their traditions about Jesus.

We have, perhaps, read too much into the oft-quoted words of Papias about preferring the reports of “living and surviving” voices over books.⁵⁷ Papias’ profession simply echoes the sort of claims that ancient historians regularly made for their works, claims that they either were eyewitnesses themselves or had learned of the events they narrate from witnesses.⁵⁸ That is, Papias’ words do not really represent a preference for oral tradition, but instead reflect the *literary* conventions of his time, in which one sought authority for one’s *written* reports through claiming that they rested on authentic witnesses. And need I remind us that this Papias who supposedly disdained books is himself reported to have written a five-volume *written* exposition of the sayings of Jesus?

It is true that Christian writers of the decades prior to ca. 150 CE do not characteristically cite texts explicitly in the way that it is done much more frequently in subsequent times. But is the practice of the post-150 CE period indicative of an emergent “text consciousness,” or is it more correct to see an emergent *author-consciousness*? That is, I suggest that what changes in the post-150 CE period is a greater tendency to see texts as the *works of authors*, and so to cite them as such, rather than simply appropriating the contents of texts. And I further suggest that a major reason for a greater emphasis on texts as products of particular authors is the swirling controversies of the second century over heresies. This led Christians to place greater emphasis on authorship of writings as a way of certifying and/or promoting them. So, for example, whereas the canonical Gospels were composed without the authors identifying themselves, across the second century we see an increasing tendency to attribute and emphasize authorship of writings, including a greater tendency to attribute

Christian manuscripts.

⁵⁷ As quoted in Eusebius, *HE* 3.39.4. But see L. C. A. Alexander, “The Living Voice: Skepticism Towards the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts,” *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, ed. D. J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 221-47.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., the discussion of Hellenistic historiography by Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, 80-83.

authorship to writings for which authorship was not an explicit feature of the text (e.g., the canonical Gospels, Hebrews).

Conclusion

Given the breadth of phenomena and issues involved in the three processes that I have addressed here, it has been necessary to limit the extent of my discussion of any of them. Where I have taken a position on controversial matters, the unavoidable brevity means that I cannot hope to have persuaded anyone firmly holding another viewpoint. But I have aspired here, not only to review the relevant phenomena and issues, but also to underscore the importance of the second century for the writings that came to comprise our New Testament. I hope also to have helped to dispose scholars of the New Testament, and scholars of the text of the New Testament in particular, to make a full harvest of the materials available for researching how New Testament writings were treated in the second century. Recent studies, and recently available manuscripts and their data as well, provide us with some potentially exciting prospects for further knowledge and insight about this crucial period. More than ever, it is in the interests of any particular question or line of inquiry into the second century that we try to take as much account as we can of the spectrum of questions, issues, and available evidence.