

MANUSCRIPTS, SCRIBES, AND  
BOOK PRODUCTION WITHIN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Michael J. Kruger

*And the sacred books of [the Christians]  
were read aloud.*

—Lucian of Samosata, *Peregr.* 11

At its core, early Christianity was a religion concerned with books. From the very beginning, Christians were committed to the books of the Hebrew Scriptures and saw them as paradigmatic for understanding the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The apostle Paul was so immersed in the Old Testament writings that he even conceived of the resurrection of Jesus “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4).<sup>1</sup> The Pauline use of books (particularly Old Testament books) in the course of his ministry is borne out in passages like 2 Tim 4:13 where Timothy is urged to “bring ... my scrolls, especially the parchments.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, gospel accounts like those of Matthew and John, as well as books like James and Hebrews, exhibit similar indebtedness to the Old Testament, often citing from it directly and extensively. Such intimate connections between the earliest Christian movement and the Old Testament writings led Harry Gamble to declare, “Indeed it is almost impossible to imagine an early Christianity that was not constructed upon the foundations of Jewish Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, it was not only the Old Testament books that mattered to early Christianity. At a very early point, Christians also began to produce their

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on Paul and the Old Testament, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), and Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See discussion in T.C. Skeat, “‘Especially the Parchments’: A Note on 2 Timothy iv.13,” *JTS* 30 (1979): 173–177.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Gamble, “Literacy, Liturgy, and the Shaping of the New Testament Canon,” in Charles Horton (ed.), *The Earliest Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 28. A fuller discussion of the origins of the Old Testament canon can be found in Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church, and its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), and more recently in Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 21–263.

own writings—gospels, letters, sermons, prophetic literature, and more—some of which eventually began to be viewed as (and used as) Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Christianity was distinguished from the surrounding religions in the Greco-Roman world precisely by its prolific production of literature and its commitment to an authoritative body of Scripture as its foundation.<sup>5</sup> Even by the end of the second century, a core collection of “New Testament” books was functioning as Scripture within early Christianity and was being read in public worship alongside the Old Testament writings (Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67.3).<sup>6</sup> So prominent were these scriptural books for Christians that even their pagan critics—like Lucian of Samosata in the opening quote above—noted the Christian predilection for writing (and using) books and thus were forced to reckon with these books in their anti-Christian attacks.<sup>7</sup> All of these factors indicate that the emerging Christian movement, like its Jewish counterpart, would be defined and shaped for generations to come by the same means: the production and use of books.

---

<sup>4</sup> Some have argued that Christianity was primarily an oral religion at the beginning with little interest in texts until a much later time; e.g. Helmut Koester, “Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?,” *JBL* 113 (1994): 293–297; W. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). However, there is no need to consider the oral and written modes of Christianity as mutually exclusive. See helpful discussions on this point in Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28–32; Graham Stanton, “Form Criticism Revisited,” in M.D. Hooker and C.J.A. Hickling (eds.), *What About the New Testament?* (London: SCM, 1975), 13–27; Graham Stanton, “The Fourfold Gospel,” *NTS* 43 (1997): 317–346, esp. 340; Loveday Alexander, “The Living Voice: Skepticism Toward the Written Word in Early Christian and Graeco-Roman Texts,” in D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowl, and S.E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 221–247; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. chs. 2, 10, and 11.

<sup>5</sup> William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); A.K. Bowman and G. Wolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), 18; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 254.

<sup>7</sup> Lucian, *Peregr.* 11–12; Origen, *Cels.* 1.34–40; A. Meredith, “Porphyry and Julian Against the Christians,” *ANRW* II.23.2, 119–1149. For more on pagan critiques of Christianity, see the helpful overview in Wayne C. Kannaday, *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition: Evidence of the Influence of Apologetic Interests on the Text of the Canonical Gospels* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 24–57; Stephen Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries AD,” *ANRW* II.23.2, 1055–1118; Robert L. Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and Robert L. Wilken, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religions and Christian Faith,” in William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken (eds.), *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1979), 117–134.

The fact that Christianity is so fundamentally shaped by a vivid “textual culture” means that any account of its origins and development must appreciate and reckon with its bookishness. However, despite this reality, most research into the origins of Christianity has concerned itself with the *content* of early Christian writings and not so much with the *vehicle* of early Christian writings—the physical book itself. While issues like authorship, date, and provenance of writings have received abundant scholarly attention, issues like the production, publication, and circulation of these writings have received dramatically less consideration.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is the goal of this chapter to restore an appreciation for the *physicality* of early Christian literature, seeing these books as artifacts in their own right and not simply carriers of historical information where the husk can be easily discarded. Indeed, when the physical and visual features of these texts are examined we quickly realize that they are not at all disposable “husks” but provide a fresh window into the literary culture of early Christianity, the development of the New Testament canon, and the expansion of the infant church.

Given the distinctive focus of this chapter on *Christian* book-production, it is important to acknowledge from the outset the scope of our study. Although the larger trends of Greco-Roman book production form a vital background and context for Christian book production, there will not be a space here to enter into that world in any substantive detail.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we shall be restricting ourselves primarily to the discussion of distinctively Christian texts, making explicit appeal to Greco-Roman writings as the situation warrants. Moreover, even within the world of Christian book production, we will be focusing primarily on those writings that eventually became part of the New Testament canon. It is the New Testament manuscripts themselves that will occupy most of our attention since they form the foundational documents for the early Christian movement.

---

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this has begun to change in recent years. In addition to Harry Gamble’s excellent study, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*. See also David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World* (TENTS 2; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Standard treatments of the Greco-Roman book include W. Schubart, *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern* (2nd ed.; ed. E. Paul; Heidelberg: Schneider, 1962); F.G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1932); H. Blanck, *Das Buch in der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1992).

## 1. THE PRODUCTION OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS

Our study will begin with an examination of the physical form of early Christian books. We will take into account how these books were constructed, the writing material used, the style of handwriting, and other noteworthy inscriptional features.

1.1. *Form*

The most notable feature of the early Christian book was that it was almost always in the form of a codex.<sup>10</sup> The primary form of a book in the broader Greco-Roman world was the scroll (or roll), which was made from sheets of papyrus or parchment pasted together (end to end) in a long strip and rolled up.<sup>11</sup> Writing was done only on the inside of the scroll so that when it was rolled up the words were protected.<sup>12</sup> The codex, in contrast, was created by taking a stack of papyrus or parchment leaves, folding them in half, and binding them at the spine. This format allowed for the traditional leaf book with writing on both sides of each page. Such a single-quire codex could hold a maximum of about 250 pages (approximately 125 leaves) before the

---

<sup>10</sup> Relevant works on the codex include A. Blanchard (ed.), *Les débuts du codex* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989); C.H. Roberts and T.C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987); E.G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977); T.C. Skeat, "The Origin of the Christian Codex," *ZPE* 102 (1994): 263–268; H.A. Sanders, "The Beginnings of the Modern Book," *University of Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 15 (1938): 95–111; C.C. McCown, "Codex and Roll in the New Testament," *HTR* 34 (1941): 219–250; L.W. Hurtado, "The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the Nomina Sacra, and the Staurogram," in Stephen G. Wilson and Michael Desjardins (eds.), *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 271–288; S.R. Llewelyn, "The Development of the Codex," in S.R. Llewelyn and R.A. Kearsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity. Vol. 7: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1982–1983* (North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University Ancient History Documentary Research Center, 1994), 249–256; Graham N. Stanton, "Why Were Early Christians Addicted to the Codex?," a chapter in his *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 165–191; Eldon J. Epp, "The Codex and Literacy in early Christianity at Oxyrhynchus: Issues Raised by Harry Y. Gamble's *Books and Readers in the Early Church*," in Charles Prebish (ed.), *Critical Review of Books in Religion 1997* (Atlanta: AAR and SBL, 1997), 15–37.

<sup>11</sup> A helpful discussion of scrolls is found in Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 43–48; and more recently in William A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Occasionally, scrolls were reused and writing was done also on the backside (or outside) of the parchment or papyrus. Such a scroll, known as an opisthograph, is likely referred to by Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 3.5.17).

binding at the spine became overtaxed and the central pages of the codex would protrude out too far when the book was closed.<sup>13</sup> Many of our earliest papyrus codices—such as  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$  (Paul),  $\mathfrak{P}^{47}$  (Revelation), and  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  (John and Luke)—were single-quire in their construction.<sup>14</sup> Larger volumes, like  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$  (four gospels and Acts), often used a multiple-quire codex that was made up of numerous single-quire units (often between 4–12 pages each) all bound together at the spine. However, sometimes a multiple-quire codex was also used for smaller works like  $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ , a late second-century codex containing only the gospel of John, suggesting that the multiple-quire format might go back well into the second century.<sup>15</sup>

It is now well established among modern scholars that early Christians not only preferred the codex instead of the roll, but they did so at a remarkably early point. Prior generations of scholars, limited by the amount of manuscript evidence at their disposal, originally considered the codex to be a rather late development.<sup>16</sup> But various manuscript discoveries—particularly documents like  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  (gospel of John),<sup>17</sup> Papyrus Egerton 2 (apocryphal gospel),<sup>18</sup> and P.Yale 1 (Genesis)<sup>19</sup>—indicate that the codex was the

<sup>13</sup> Some single-quire codices could hold even more, e.g., P. Milan Vogliano V, a Coptic edition of Paul's letters, contains more than 280 pages. For more on the capacity of such codices, see Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 65–66; Turner, *Typology of the Early Codex*, 55–60.

<sup>14</sup> T.C. Skeat, "The Oldest Manuscripts of the Four Gospels?," *NTS* 43 (1997): 1–34, argues that  $\mathfrak{P}^4$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{64}$ , and  $\mathfrak{P}^{67}$  are all from the same *single-quire* codex which contained all four gospels. If so, then this would be an example of how single-quire codices could be used for quite sizeable volumes. Skeat has been challenged in recent years by Peter M. Head, "Is  $\mathfrak{P}^4$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{64}$ , and  $\mathfrak{P}^{67}$  the Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels? A Response to T.C. Skeat," *NTS* 51 (2005): 450–457.

<sup>15</sup> Some have suggested that  $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$  is even in the first half of the second century; see Herbert Hunger, "Zur Datierung des Papyrus Bodmer II ( $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ )," *Anzeiger der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 4 (1960): 12–33.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. C.R. Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), declared, "I am inclined to think that this change [from roll to codex] was made about the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century" (322). In fact, he viewed codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as some of the first codices to be made. For discussion, see McCown, "Codex and Roll," 219–221.

<sup>17</sup> C.H. Roberts, "An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library," *BJRL* 20 (1936): 45–55.

<sup>18</sup> The key works on this gospel include, G. Mayeda, *Das Leben-Jesu-Fragment Papyrus Egerton 2 und seine Stellung in der urchristlichen Literaturgeschichte* (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1946); Jon B. Daniels, "The Egerton Gospel: Its Place in Early Christianity" (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1990); C.H. Dodd, "A New Gospel," *BJRL* 20 (1936): 56–92; H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1935); and most recently Thomas Kraus, Michael J. Kruger, and Tobias Nicklas, *Gospel Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), see section one.

<sup>19</sup> C.H. Roberts, "P Yale 1 and the Early Christian Book," *ASTP* 1 (1966): 25–28.

widely established Christian practice by the early second century, if not late in the first.<sup>20</sup> So dominant was the Christian preference for the codex, in the face of a broader Greco-Roman world that continued to use the roll for centuries to come,<sup>21</sup> that some have even suggested that the codex may have been a Christian invention.<sup>22</sup> It was not until the fourth century and beyond that the rest of the ancient world began to prefer the codex to the roll, something Christians had done centuries earlier.<sup>23</sup>

With these considerations in mind, the question of why Christians preferred the codex has been widely debated. Suggestions that the codex was chosen for practical advantages (convenience, size, cost) or for socio-economic reasons (the lack of education among Christians made the informal codex more palatable) have been largely considered inadequate.<sup>24</sup> Although such factors may have played some role, they would only allow an incremental and gradual transition to the codex over many years, and thus cannot account for the fact that the transition to the codex was rather abrupt, early, and widespread.<sup>25</sup> A more foundational and influential cause is needed to

---

<sup>20</sup> Roberts and Skeat confirmed the early dominance of the codex by showing how it was the format of choice for Christians from the very beginning of Christian book production (*Birth of the Codex*, 38–44). This early date has been challenged by J. van Haelst, “Les origines du codex,” in A. Blanchard (ed.), *Les débuts du codex* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), 13–36, where he argues for a later date for some of these manuscripts. E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 10, also cautions against excessively early dates. However, T.C. Skeat, “Early Christian Book-Production,” in G.W.H. Lampe (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 54–79, and Roberts, “P Yale 1 and the Early Christian Book,” 25–28, maintain an early date by appealing to the discovery of P.Yale 1, the papyrus codex containing Genesis, which dates from 80–100 CE. Moreover, recent manuscript discoveries continue to confirm the dominance of the codex. Between 1997 and 1999, a number of early manuscripts from Oxyrhynchus were discovered and were all on codices: P.Oxy. 4403–4404 (Matthew); P.Oxy 4445–4448 (John); P.Oxy. 4494–4500 (fragments of Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, Hebrews and Revelation).

<sup>21</sup> See statistics offered by Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 44–53.

<sup>22</sup> Skeat, “Early Christian Book Production,” 68. See discussion in McCown, “Codex and Roll in the New Testament,” 219–221. Of course, now it is well-accepted that the codex was likely a Roman invention (see Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 15–23).

<sup>23</sup> Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 35–37.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 45–53; Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 63–69; T.C. Skeat, “The Length of the Standard Papyrus Roll and the Cost Advantage of the Codex,” *ZPE* 45 (1982): 169–175.

<sup>25</sup> Other theories about the origin of the codex suffer from some of the same problems. For example, Epp (“Codex and Literacy,” 15–37) and Michael McCormick, “The Birth of the Codex and the Apostolic Life-Style,” *Scriptorium* 39 (1985): 150–158, suggest the codex was established by its use in the travels of itinerant missionaries; and Stanton, “Why Were Early Christians Addicted to the Codex,” 181–191, suggests that it was early Christian uses

explain the transition. Consequently, the most plausible suggestions are those that link the codex with the early development of the New Testament canon. Skeat has suggested the codex was chosen because it, and it alone, could hold all four gospels in one volume, and thus set a precedent for early Christian book production.<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Gamble has suggested that the codex was chosen because it could hold all of Paul's epistles in one volume and allow easy access to individual letters.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of which of these theories proves to be more plausible—and each has strengths and weaknesses—it seems that the significance of the codex lies in its role in the development of the corpus of New Testament books. As J.K. Elliott has noted, “Canon and codex go hand in hand in the sense that the adoption of a fixed canon could be more easily controlled and promulgated when the codex was the means of gathering together originally separate compositions.”<sup>28</sup>

The link between codex and canon sheds some much-needed light on the relationship between the *form* of a book and the *content* of a book. When it comes to *scriptural* books, the Christian preference for the codex is so overwhelming that one is hard pressed to find copies that are not on codices.<sup>29</sup> However, at the same time, Christians still employed the roll format on occasion for other kinds of books, as in P.Oxy. 405 (*Irenaeus, Against Heresies*); P.Mich. 130 (*Shepherd of Hermas*); P.Oxy. 655 (*Gospel of Thomas*); and P.Ryl. 463 (*Gospel of Mary*). Of course, this pattern does not suggest that any book copied onto a codex was considered scriptural by early Christians—we have numerous extrabiblical books on codices.<sup>30</sup>

---

of primitive “notebooks” (e.g., wax, wooden, and parchment tablets) for recording sayings of Jesus or Old Testament prooftexts that led to the wholesale adoption of the codex.

<sup>26</sup> Skeat, “Origin of the Christian Codex,” 263–268. One is also reminded of the comments of Frederick Kenyon: “When, therefore, Irenaeus at the end of the second century writes of the four Gospels as the divinely provided evidence of Christianity, and the number four as almost axiomatic, it is now possible to believe that he may have been accustomed to the sight of volumes in which all four [Gospels] were contained” (F.G. Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible* [London: Emery Walker, 1933–1937], 113).

<sup>27</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58–66; Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 69–83.

<sup>28</sup> J.K. Elliott, “Manuscripts, the Codex, and the Canon,” *JSNT* 63 (1996): 111.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., during the second century we have only the following Christian scriptural books not on codices: P.IFAO (Revelation); P.Oxy. 4443 (Esther); P.Barc.inv. 2 (Psalms). However, it should be noted that the manuscript of Revelation is simply a reused roll (opisthograph) and therefore does not represent a conscious decision to use a roll. Moreover, it is uncertain whether the manuscripts of Esther and Psalms derive from a Christian or Jewish provenance. For more discussion, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 54–56.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., P.land. 1.4 (*Shepherd of Hermas*); P.Lond.Christ.1 (P.Egerton 2).

However, it does suggest that some Christians (in certain instances) may have reserved the roll format for books that they did *not* consider scriptural. Put differently, Christians not only had a general preference for the codex, but, as Hurtado has stated, “Christians favored the codex *particularly* for the writings they treated as scripture.”<sup>31</sup>

### 1.2. *Material*

In addition to the format of early books, ancient writing material—whether papyrus<sup>32</sup> or parchment<sup>33</sup>—was another important factor in Christian book production. Papyrus was produced from the papyrus plant, a reed that typically grew 2–5 meters in height and was primarily found in the Nile region in upper Egypt (though also found in parts of Palestine). The stem of the plant was cut into long, thin strips which were laid side by side and then another layer of strips was placed over them at right angles. When these strips were compressed tightly together the juice of the plant would be excreted and would act as a glue of sorts, binding the strips together. This created a strong,<sup>34</sup> paper-like writing surface with horizontal fibers on one side, and vertical fibers on the other—often known as the recto and verso respectively.<sup>35</sup> Parchment (or vellum) was made from animal skin (usually sheep, goats, or calves) where the hair is removed from the pelt and then

<sup>31</sup> Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 59 (emphasis mine).

<sup>32</sup> For more on papyrus, see Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Turner, *Greek Papyri*; Naphtali Lewis, *Papyrus in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974); F.G. Kenyon, *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899); and Eldon J. Epp, “The New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective,” in M.P. Horgan and Paul J. Kobelski (eds.), *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 261–288.

<sup>33</sup> For details on the history and production of parchment, see R. Reed, *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers* (London: Seminar Press, 1972); M.L. Ryder, “The Biology and History of Parchment,” in P. Ruck (ed.), *Pergament: Geschichte, Struktur, Restaurierung, Herstellung* (Simarigen: Thorbecke, 1991), 25–33; Richard R. Johnson, “The Role of Parchment in Greco-Roman Antiquity” (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> Both Skeat, “Early Christian Book-Production,” 59–60, and Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 45, make a point to dispel the misconception that papyrus is a fragile material. See comments on papyrus by Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 13.74–82.

<sup>35</sup> E.G. Turner, “Recto and Verso,” *JEA* 40 (1954):102–106; E.G. Turner, *The Terms Recto and Verso: The Anatomy of the Papyrus Roll* (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1978). When papyrus was used to make a roll, the horizontal fibers (which were easiest for the scribe to write upon) would be placed on the inside, and when made into a codex, scribes would often arrange the leaves so that when the book was open horizontal fibers would be facing horizontal fibers and vertical fibers would be facing vertical fibers. See Turner, *Typology of the Codex*, 55–71.



the skin is washed, soaked, stretched and tanned. Afterwards, an intensive scraping process creates parchment of various thickness and quality. The resulting writing surface has two sides, a “hair” side that is typically darker and rougher due to the remains of the hair roots, and a “flesh” side that tends to be lighter and smoother.<sup>36</sup>

Although it is unclear whether the first codices in the broader Greco-Roman world were parchment or papyrus, the extant MSS in our possession indicate that papyrus was the material of choice in the construction of the earliest *Christian* codices.<sup>37</sup> Of Greek and Christian literature from the fourth century and earlier, Turner found some 160 codices of papyrus compared to only 29 of parchment.<sup>38</sup> Only three of these parchment codices could be placed definitively in the second century, and none of them were Christian documents. In terms of just New Testament books, no parchment MSS are found from the second century, only one from the second/third century (0189), two from the third century (0212, 0220), and two from the third/fourth century (0162, 0171).<sup>39</sup> In the fourth century, the

---

<sup>36</sup> The terms “recto” and “verso” have also been applied to parchment manuscripts with the flesh side generally being referred to as the “recto” (since it is the preferred writing surface) and the hair side being referred to as the “verso.” However, such uses of these terms have created problems. Since, in a strict sense, the term “recto” simply refers to the front of a folio and the “verso” to the back (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 265 n9), questions arise as to whether the terms should be used simply for the front and back of a document or for the horizontal/flesh and vertical/hair sides. For example, in the apocryphal gospel fragment, P.Oxy. 840, the original editors unexpectedly referred to the *front* of the folio as the “verso” (because it was the hair side), causing a substantive deal of confusion in subsequent literature on the fragment. For the original edition of P.Oxy. 840, see Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *Fragment of an Uncanonical Gospel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1908). For more discussion of its use of recto and verso, see Michael J. Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior: An Analysis of P.Oxy. 840 and Its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity* (TENTS 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), 21–22, 35–36.

<sup>37</sup> We do have evidence that parchment codices were known and used quite early in Egypt. P.Oxy. 30 is a non-Christian manuscript from Egypt containing the historical work *De bellis Macedonicis*. This Latin text is in the form of a parchment codex and can be dated to the early second century (Turner, *Typology*, 38). In regard to whether the parchment or papyrus codex was first, Roberts and Skeat declare, “At present the question is wide open” (Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 29). For further discussion of the significance of parchment and papyrus when evaluating a manuscript, including P.Oxy. 840, see Thomas J. Kraus, “Pergament oder Papyrus?: Anmerkungen zur Signifikanz des Beschreibstoffes bei der Behandlung von Manuskripten,” *NTS* 49 (2003): 425–432.

<sup>38</sup> Turner, *Typology*, 37–39.

<sup>39</sup> Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1989), 76.

situation begins to change rapidly and we find fourteen papyrus MSS and fourteen parchment MSS. The fifth century reveals 36 parchment MSS and two papyrus MSS.<sup>40</sup> From this point onwards parchment is the dominant material.<sup>41</sup>

This notable transition from papyrus to parchment can provide at least broad guidelines in our dating of New Testament manuscripts. Any parchment manuscript is unlikely to be earlier than the third century given the fact that we have no extant New Testament texts on parchment from that time period.<sup>42</sup> The transition from papyrus to parchment also brought with it new scribal conventions, particularly the increased use of color. Although color appeared occasionally in earlier papyrus manuscripts,<sup>43</sup> it became more dominant in the fourth century and later because animal skin proved particularly fitting for the application of colored ink, resulting in deluxe volumes with decorations and miniatures.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> This overall trend is confirmed by a key fourth-century reference to parchment codices by Eusebius (331 CE) in his *Life of Constantine* where he records the request of Constantine to have fifty copies of the scriptures made “on fine parchment” (*Vit. Const.* 4.36). For more discussion, see Kirsopp Lake, “The Sinaitic and Vatican Manuscripts and the Copies Sent by Eusebius to Constantinople,” *HTR* 11 (1918): 32–35.

<sup>42</sup> Papyrus is less useful for dating because it continued to be used beyond the fourth century, even though it generally characterizes manuscripts that are earlier than that time period. Examples of later papyrus manuscripts include, P<sup>3</sup> (sixth century); P<sup>41</sup> (eighth century); P<sup>359</sup> (seventh century); and P<sup>61</sup> (seventh century).

<sup>43</sup> E.g., the apocryphal Fayyum Gospel (P.Vindob. G. 2325) dating from the third century where the red ink was used for the abbreviation πττ for Πέτρος. See C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 17 n. 7).

<sup>44</sup> The fifth/sixth century Vienna Genesis (Theol. Gr. 31) is dyed purple and contains 48 miniatures illustrating the content of the text (which was written in silver). Some books simply had the initial letters enlarged and decorated with a variety of colors; e.g., fourth century Codex Vaticanus was given large and colorful (blue) initial letters by a later scribe; the first three lines of Deuteronomy, and the title and first two lines of Joshua were written in red ink in the fifth century Washington (W) manuscript; and codex Bezae used red ink for the first three lines of each book. The apocryphal gospel P.Oxy. 840 also used red ink to mark punctuation, *nomina sacra*, and to outline enlarged letters (Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior*, 48–49). Red ink was also a popular color for early Egyptian Demotic papyri and was frequently used to mark chapter or section headings (e.g., P.Lond.demot. 10070; P.Brit.Mus. inv. 10588; P.Louvre E3229). For discussion, see Janet H. Johnson, “Introduction to the Demotic Magical Papyri,” in Hans Dieter Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), lv–lviii, and Georges Posener, “Sur l’emploi de l’encre rouge dans les manuscrits égyptiens,” *JEA* 37 (1951): 75–80.

### 1.3. Size

Although Christian codices were produced in a wide range of sizes—with heights ranging from 41 to 2.9 cm.—the average height of codices in the second and third centuries exceeded 20 cm.<sup>45</sup> This range is borne out in some of our most significant New Testament manuscripts,  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$  (20.4 × 25.4 cm.<sup>46</sup>),  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  (18 × 21.3 cm.<sup>47</sup>), and  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  (13 × 26 cm.). The width of codices also varied over a wide range, but papyrus codices tended to be more narrow in width than their parchment counterparts, with the height often being twice the width (as can be seen in  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  and P  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  just mentioned above).<sup>48</sup> In contrast to the common oblong shape of papyrus codices, parchment codices had a more equal height and width, creating a more square shape.<sup>49</sup> The more narrow format of the papyrus codex is possibly due to the fact that the sheets of the codex were typically cut from a manufactured roll of papyrus.<sup>50</sup> The height of the codex was determined by the height of the roll,<sup>51</sup> but the width of the codex was determined by the length of the sheets that were cut (which would then be folded in half to form a codex). Although, in principle, the sheets of the codex could be cut at any length desired, the standard practice was to try to avoid the seams on the roll where the papyrus sheets had been glued together (known as *kolleseis*). Given this limitation on the length of the sheet, it would naturally create a codex with a more narrow width when that sheet was folded in half.

One noteworthy feature of early Christian books is the phenomenon of the “miniature” codex (defined by Turner as less than 10 cm. wide). Small codices were not rare in the ancient world and most likely were designed for private use.<sup>52</sup> Despite their small size, some could contain a surprising number of pages.<sup>53</sup> The advent of miniature parchment codices in secular

<sup>45</sup> Turner, *Typology*, 14–22; Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 162–163.

<sup>46</sup> Dimensions will list breadth first and then height in accordance with Turner’s methodology.

<sup>47</sup> Although  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  is a tiny fragment, its overall dimensions can be estimated with a fair degree of accuracy.

<sup>48</sup> See Turner’s group 8 (*Typology*, 20). Of course, there are numerous papyrus codices that are wide (e.g., P.Oxy. 2258, 37 × 28 cm.) or have a more square format (e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ , 14.2 × 16.2 cm.).

<sup>49</sup> The only parchment codex mentioned by Turner with a height that is twice its width is the fifth century Demosthenes, *Symmorios* (8.5 × 17.5 cm.).

<sup>50</sup> Turner, *Typology*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Although the height of the codex was limited by the height of the roll, the codex could be made *shorter* than the roll if further cuts were made (Turner, *Typology*, 50–51).

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 10–11.

<sup>53</sup> The Mani Codex is the smallest known miniature codex and is about the size of a matchbox (3.5 × 4.5 cm.), yet still contains 192 pages. For more discussion, see A. Henrichs

literature can be dated back to the time of Martial where classical authors (e.g., Homer, Virgil, Cicero) were put in the format of *pugillaribus membranis* for the private use of the literate upper class.<sup>54</sup> However, this innovation did not appear to meet with much success and in the later years of Martial's publishing there are no more references to the miniature parchment codex. The popular return of the pocket codex in the fourth century can be attributed in large part to early Christian communities. The fact that 47 of the 55 codices listed by Turner are Christian demonstrates that it was a favored format among private Christian book owners.<sup>55</sup> These tiny books were often quite elegant and provided convenient and portable access to various forms of Christian literature. Roberts sums it up well, "They are best regarded not as amulets but as devotional handbooks for the well-to-do."<sup>56</sup>

The majority of the miniature codices are on parchment and not on papyrus. Of the 55 codices Turner catalogs, 45 are on parchment, composing over 80% of the known miniature codices.<sup>57</sup> For that reason, most of these tiny books date to the fourth century and later, although some do appear earlier (e.g. P.Oxy 849; P.Lit.Lond. 204, both third century). Also, miniature codices preserve a surprising number of non-canonical texts: the *Shepherd*

---

and L. Koenen, "Ein griechischer Mani-Codex (P.Colon. inv. nr. 4780)," *ZPE* 5 (1970): 97–216. Other miniature codices also contained an impressive number of pages. The *Acts of Peter*, P.Oxy. 849 (early fourth century), contains the page numbers 167 and 168 in the top margin.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Turner, *Typology*, 22, 29–30. Curiously, Turner does not include P.Ryl. 3.463 which is a page from a third century miniature codex (9.9 × 8.9), containing the *Gospel of Mary*, though this could be because of some ambiguity about its original size. The fact that the vast number of miniature codices are Christian has spurred speculation that the miniature codex was a distinctively Christian invention. Roberts declares, "On present evidence the miniature codex would seem to be a Christian invention" (*Manuscript*, 12). Gamble takes a more moderate approach, "The miniature format was, if not a uniquely Christian phenomenon, one heavily favored by Christians" (*Books and Readers*, 236).

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> This figure is nearly the exact opposite of the material used for amulets, where 73 out of 93 are on papyrus (78%) according to J. van Haelst, *Catalogue des Papyrus Littéraires Juifs et Chrétiens* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976). The tendency to use papyrus for amulets seems to have little to do with the dates of these texts. According to van Haelst, virtually all amulets are fourth century or later, and the majority of these are concentrated in the fifth and sixth centuries—which would have been a quite natural time to use parchment. Thus, it seems possible that early Christians viewed amulets and miniature codices as distinct literary forms requiring different materials. For more discussion of amulets and miniature codices, see Michael J. Kruger, "P.Oxy. 840: Amulet or Miniature Codex?," *JTS* 53 (2002): 81–94; and Thomas J. Kraus, "P.Oxy. V 840—Amulett oder Miniaturkodex? Grundsätzliche und ergänzende Anmerkungen zu zwei Termini," *ZAC* 8 (2004): 485–497.

of *Hermas* (P.Oxy. 1783 [V.H. 659]),<sup>58</sup> *Acts of Peter* (P.Oxy. 849 [V.H. 603]), *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (P.Ant. 1.13 [V.H. 610] and P.Ant 1.6 [V.H. 609]), an apocryphal gospel (P.Oxy. 840 [V.H. 585]), *Protevangeliium of James* (P.Grenf. 1.8 [V.H. 601]), *Didache* (P.Oxy. 1782 [V.H. 642]),<sup>59</sup> the *Apocalypse of Peter* (V.H. 619),<sup>60</sup> the *Life of Mani* (P.Colon. inv. 4780 [V.H. 1072]), *Bel and the Dragon* (Bodl. gr. bib. d2 [V.H. 323, 1083, palimpsest]), the *Gospel of Mary* (P.Ryl. 3.463 [V.H. 1065]), VI Ezra (P.Oxy. 1010 [V.H. 574]), Tobit (P.Oxy. 1594 [V.H. 82]), and the *Apocalypse* (P.Oxy. 1080 [V.H. 561]).<sup>61</sup> In contrast to larger codices designed for public use, the tiny format of these books allowed them to be easily carried on journeys, quickly referred to in the context of conversations (perhaps evangelistic discussions), and conveniently hid during times of persecution (e.g., Diocletian). Furthermore, the abundance of apocryphal literature in these miniature codices indicates that private books may have been a primary means of promulgating literature that had not been approved by ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>62</sup>

#### 1.4. *Inscriptional Features*

The earliest Christian papyri (second and third centuries) were not characterized by the formal bookhand that was common among Jewish scriptural books or Greco-Roman literary texts, but were marked by a more plain hand that could be called “informal uncial” or even “reformed documentary.”<sup>63</sup> This style of handwriting has affinities with the documentary papyri of the same time period, such as its use of spaces between groups of words<sup>64</sup> or an

<sup>58</sup> The abbreviation “V.H.” refers to the catalog of van Haelst mentioned above.

<sup>59</sup> See also R.H. Connolly, “New Fragments of the Didache,” *JTS* 25 (1924): 151–153.

<sup>60</sup> See also K. Prümm, “De genuino Apocalypsis Petri textu,” *Bib* 10 (1929): 62–80 and M.R. James, “The Rainer Fragment of the Apocalypse of Peter,” *JTS* 32 (1931): 270–279.

<sup>61</sup> To some, Revelation was seen as non-canonical.

<sup>62</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 236.

<sup>63</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 14. It is important to note that some *literary* papyri of classical works were also written in a rather plain, unadorned, and non-callographic hand (e.g. P.Oxy. 1809, 2076, 2288). However, E.G. Turner does not necessarily consider this as an indication of low scribal quality; indeed, he declares that “‘calligraphic’ hands are suspect ... It is not uncommon for the finest looking hands to be marred by gross carelessness in transcription” (“Scribes and Scholars,” in A.K. Bowman et al. [eds.], *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* [London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007], 258–259).

<sup>64</sup> Examples of the use of spacing in Christian manuscripts include P.Egerton 2 (second century); P<sup>36</sup> (late second century); P.Dura inv. 24 (third century); P<sup>75</sup> (third century); P<sup>100</sup> (third/fourth century); P<sup>115</sup> (third/fourth century); P.Oxy. 1080 (fourth century); the Chester Beatty Melito (fourth century); Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century); Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century). Examples of Greek texts that leave spaces include, Hypomnema on Homer, Iliad,

enlarged letter at the beginning of a line (or new sentence).<sup>65</sup> Although this style did not share the elegance and artistry of the typical literary script, it was not as rough and rapidly written as most documentary papyri. The practical and no-frills hand of early Christian scribes simply “suggests an interest in the *content* of the text that is more or less indifferent to its appearance.”<sup>66</sup>

Lest one construe the early stages of Christian handwriting as unprofessional, Roberts is quick to point out that “a degree of regularity and clarity is aimed at and achieved.”<sup>67</sup> Although early Christian papyri certainly exhibit a mix of literary and documentary features, Hanes-Eitzen acknowledges that early Christian papyri “appear toward the literary end of the spectrum.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the fact that a number of early Christian

---

B.M. Pap. 2055; Thucydides I.2.P. Hamb. 646; and Menander, Sikyonios, P.Sorbonne, Inv. 2272b. For more discussion, see W.H.P. Hatch, *The Principal Uncial Manuscripts of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 3 and Kenyon, *Palaeography*, 26–27. E.J. Revell, “The Oldest Evidence for the Hebrew Accent System,” *BJRL* 54 (1971): 214–222, esp. 214–215, notes that a number of texts from Qumran exhibit such spacing in order to mark various divisions in the text, showing that spacing is one of the earliest forms of punctuation in the ancient world.

<sup>65</sup> Such enlarged first letters were often employed in documentary papyri for the opening word of a text, for the name of the addressee, and for the beginning of new sections or sentences; e.g., two second century documentary texts, *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* and P.Brem. 5. However, it should be noted that such a practice was not unheard of in Roman or Ptolemaic literary papyri: P.Oxy. 2161 (Aeschylus, *Dictyulci*); P.Oxy. 1373 (Aristophanes, *Equites*); P.Oxy. 1235 (Hypotheses to Menander); P.Oxy. 1182 (Demosthenes, *De Falsa Legatione*); P.Oxy. 473 (Honorary Decree). See E.G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (2nd ed.; London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1987), 9, for more detailed discussion. Although enlarged initial letters are found in some of our earliest Christian texts—P.Egerton 2 (second century), P.Ant. 1.12 (third century), Chester Beatty Numbers and Deuteronomy (second/third century), Chester Beatty Ezekiel (third century)—the practice did not become abundant or pronounced until the fourth century or later as can be seen in texts like Chester Beatty Melito (fourth century), P.Berlin inv. 6747 (fourth century), Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century), Codex Bezae (fifth century).

<sup>66</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 71; emphasis mine. William Johnson points out that much of the elegance of the literary manuscripts in the Greco-Roman world was due to the fact that “the literary roll exemplifies high culture not just in the demonstration that the owner is ‘literate’ and educated, but by means of aesthetics the bookroll also points to the refinement of the owner ... In ancient society, that reading was largely an elitist phenomenon was accepted as a matter of course” (“Towards a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity,” *AJP* 121 [2000]: 613, 615). It is possible, then, that early Christians, concerned *not* with establishing their own elite status but reaching to the common man, would have (initially) constructed their manuscripts not as objects of art or indicators of status, but in a manner primarily concerned with content and accessibility.

<sup>67</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 65. The general distinction between “literary” and

manuscripts contained an impressive amount of punctuation and readers aids—which are rare even in literary papyri—suggests that early Christian scribes were more in tune with professional book production than often realized.<sup>69</sup> In addition, it cannot be overlooked that many early Christian texts do exhibit a more refined hand and literary style, such as a late second/early third-century text of Irenaeus *Against Heresies* (P.Oxy. 405) which has a “handsome professional hand,”<sup>70</sup> a late second-century text of Matthew (P.Oxy. 2683) which has an “elegant hand,”<sup>71</sup> a late second-century copy of Paul’s epistles (P<sup>46</sup>) which has a hand with “style and elegance,”<sup>72</sup> a late second/early third-century copy of Luke and Matthew (P<sup>4</sup>-P<sup>64</sup>-P<sup>67</sup>) which has a “handsome script” which is “incontrovertibly literary in style”<sup>73</sup> and a late second-century copy of John (P<sup>66</sup>) which has calligraphy of “such high quality” that it may “indicate the work of a scriptorium.”<sup>74</sup> By the fourth century and beyond, this more refined bookhand had become the norm for Christian texts.

A particularly important inscriptional feature of early Christian manuscripts was the use of the *nomina sacra*. The term *nomina sacra* refers to certain words that were written in a special abbreviated form in Christian documents in order to set them apart as sacred.<sup>75</sup> They usually appeared as a

---

“documentary” papyri has come under criticism as some scholars have challenged the sharp dichotomy that is often drawn between the two. For more on this point see, Turner, *Greek Papyri*, vi–vii; Roger A. Pack, *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (2nd ed.; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 1; and Eldon Jay Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” in B.A. Pearson et al. (eds.), *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 39–40.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., P.Mich. 130 (*Shepherd of Hermas*; third century) and P.Ryl. 1.1 (Deuteronomy; third/fourth century) contain a surprising number of accents and other lectional aids. Such features indicated that many early Christian books were written for public reading; for more on this see, Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 203–230.

<sup>70</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri*, vol. 3/1, ix.

<sup>73</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 23. For a discussion on dating these fragments see Skeat, “The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels,” 26–31.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Papyrus Bodmer II (p66): Its Textual Relationships and Scribal Characteristics* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1968), 82, n. 20.

<sup>75</sup> Studies on the *nomina sacra* include Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung* (Munich: Beck, 1907); A.H.R.E. Paap, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959); Jose O’Callaghan, *Nomina Sacra in Papyrus Graecis Saeculi III Neotestamentariis* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970); S. Brown, “Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*,” *SPap* 9 (1970): 7–19; G. Howard, “The Tetragram and the New Testament,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 63–83; Roberts, *Manuscript*, 26–48;

contraction (and occasionally by suspension) with a horizontal line over the top. Roberts divides the *nomina sacra* into three categories: (a) the earliest and most consistent four, Ἰησοῦ, χριστός, κύριος, θεός (b) those that appear relatively frequently and also quite early, πνεῦμα, ἄνθρωπος, σταυρός and (c) the latest and least consistent, πατήρ, υἱός, σωτήρ, μήτηρ, οὐρανός, Ἰσραήλ, Δαυεῖδ, Ἱερουσαλήμ.<sup>76</sup>

Although the origin of the *nomina sacra* is unclear and still being debated,<sup>77</sup> their significance lies in the fact that they not only appear in the very earliest of our Greek manuscripts, but their appearance is remarkably widespread across regions and languages—even apocryphal texts were no exception.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, so distinctive was the use of the *nomina sacra* that in many ways it identified a manuscript as being Christian in its origins. Consequently, there are good reasons to think that these abbreviations were not concerned with saving space but functioned as a textual way to show Christian reverence and devotion to Christ alongside of God—particularly given that the earliest terms of the *nomina sacra* were Ἰησοῦ, χριστός, κύριος and

---

Larry W. Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 655–673; C.M. Tuckett, “‘*Nomina Sacra*: Yes and No?,” in J.M. Auwers and H.J. De Jonge (eds.), *The Biblical Canons* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 431–458. ■ lower case d?

<sup>76</sup> Although these fifteen are the most common, scribes occasionally experimented with new/different words as *nomina sacra*. Examples of such variants can be found in P.Egerton 2 and P.Oxy. 1008 (P<sup>15</sup>). For other examples of variants of *nomina sacra* see Kurt Aland (ed.), *Repertorium der griechischen christlichen Papyri, I, Biblische Papyri* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 420–428 and Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Bible: An Introduction to Greek Palaeography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 36–37.

<sup>77</sup> For various approaches, see Kurt Treu, “Die Bedeutung des Griechischen für die Juden im römischen Reich,” *Kairos* 15 (1973): 123–144; Robert A. Kraft, “The ‘Textual Mechanics’ of Early Jewish LXX/OG Papyri and Fragments,” in Scot McKendrick and Orlaith O’Sullivan (eds.), *The Bible as Book: The Transmission of the Greek Text* (London: British Library, 2003), 51–72; Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament*, 11–19; Hurtado, “The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*,” 655–673; Brown, “Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*,” 7–19.

<sup>78</sup> Most notably, it appears the *nomina sacra* are found in our earliest New Testament fragment, P<sup>52</sup>. This has been challenged by Christopher M. Tuckett, “P<sup>52</sup> and the *Nomina Sacra*,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 544–548. For responses to Tuckett see Charles E. Hill, “Did the Scribe of P<sup>52</sup> Use the *Nomina Sacra*? Another Look,” *NTS* 48 (2002): 587–592, and Larry W. Hurtado, “P<sup>52</sup> (P.Rylands Gk. 457) and the *Nomina Sacra*: Method and Probability,” *TynBul* 54 (2003): 1–14. *Nomina sacra* are found not only in Greek MSS, but also in Latin, Coptic, Slavonic and Armenian. Furthermore, they are widely found in apocryphal texts (P.Egerton 2, *Gospel of Thomas*, P.Oxy. 840), amulets (see Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950], 185, 223), and other Christian literature. The rare exceptions occur in private documents, magical texts (e.g., P.Oxy. 407), or from oversights of a careless scribe (e.g., P.Oxy. 656; Traube, *Nomina Sacra*, 90). For more detail, see Roberts, *Manuscript*, 27.



θεός.<sup>79</sup> Such an early and dominant scribal convention suggests an emerging Christian scribal culture that was not as individualistic and decentralized as is often times supposed.<sup>80</sup> When taken in conjunction with the unique, widespread, and early use of the codex (as noted above), T.C. Skeat argues that the *nomina sacra* “indicate a degree of organization, of conscious planning, and uniformity of practice among the Christian communities which we have hitherto had little reason to suspect.”<sup>81</sup> Epp agrees, “[Churches] were perhaps not as loosely organized as been assumed, and, therefore, they were also not as isolated from one another as has been affirmed. Indeed, at least one ‘program of standardization’—the *nomina sacra*—was certainly functioning with obvious precision and care.”<sup>82</sup>

## 2. THE TRANSMISSION OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS

Now that we have examined (briefly) the mechanics of how early Christian books, particularly scriptural books, were produced, we now turn our attention to the manner in which these books were copied and transmitted in the earliest centuries (first through third) of the Christian faith. Since this subject is far too vast to cover in detail here, we will provide a general overview, focusing upon Christian scribes and some key aspects of how books were published and circulated.

---

<sup>79</sup> Tuckett, “Nomina Sacra,” 431–458 challenges this conception of the *nomina sacra*. Rebuttal to Tuckett is offered by Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 122–133.

<sup>80</sup> Hanes-Eitzen downplays the significance of the *nomina sacra* in this regard, arguing that it does not provide any evidence for organization and structure amongst early Christian scribes (*Guardians of Letters*, 92–94). She bases this argument on the fact that scribes were not always consistent in the words they abbreviated. However, she overplays the amount of disparity in regard to the way *nomina sacra* were employed. To be sure, there were differences amongst various scribes, but the overall pattern is still intact (particularly as it pertains to the four main epithets: Ἰησοῦς, χριστός, κύριος, and θεός). Moreover, even if one were to grant that scribes were routinely inconsistent in the way they used the *nomina sacra*, one still has to explain its early and dominant appearance. The scribal convention still demands an explanation, even if it is inconsistently applied. With this in mind, Hanes-Eitzen’s explanation that the *nomina sacra* originated from (and were disseminated through) *only* haphazard scribal relationships seems inadequate. If this were the case, we would expect the adoption of the *nomina sacra* to be gradual and slow—precisely the opposite of what we find.

<sup>81</sup> Skeat, “Early Christian Book-Production,” 73.

<sup>82</sup> Eldon Jay 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 Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 288.

### 2.1. *Christian Scribes*

Although we have very little direct testimony about the scribes who copied Christian texts in the earliest centuries of the Christian movement,<sup>83</sup> the above discussion has already revealed some key information about them. It appears that the earliest Christian scribes were not necessarily trained solely in the art of copying literary texts (though some Christian scribes were), but were often “multifunctional scribes” who were used to copying *both* documentary and literary texts.<sup>84</sup> These were professional scribes to be sure—meaning this was the occupation in which they were primarily engaged—and most knew their craft well, but they typically would not have been literary copyists who were employed in the commercial book trade.<sup>85</sup> Instead, it appears these early Christian scribes were often the type which were employed privately by individuals who may have varying needs, such as taking letters by dictation, producing administrative documents, or the copying of letters or formal literary pieces.

Such multifunctional (and largely private) scribes were common in the Greco-Roman world as can be seen by the account of a certain clerk/secretary Chariton of Aphrodisias who did administrative work for a lawyer

---

<sup>83</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 68. For some other general works on scribes in the ancient world, see E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (WUNT 2.42; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991); L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Elaine Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture from Cicero to Apuleius* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Turner, “Scribes and Scholars,” 256–261; E.G. Turner, “Roman Oxyrhynchus,” *JEA* 38 (1952): 78–93; Peter Parsons, “Copyists of Oxyrhynchus,” in A.K. Bowman et al. (eds.), *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007), 262–270; and Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus*.

<sup>84</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 39. We have evidence from practice exercises preserved on Greco-Roman papyri that a single scribe was often capable of writing in very contrasting styles, ranging from formal bookhand to informal cursive (e.g., P.Oxy. 4669; P.Köln IV.175). We should be careful, therefore, to assume the hand of a particular manuscript tells us everything about the training/ability of the scribe. For more, see Parsons “Copyists of Oxyrhynchus,” 269–270.

<sup>85</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 68. Of course, this is not to suggest that every Christian manuscript was copied by a professional scribe. Undoubtedly, there would have been instances where a non-professional scribe would have undertaken the task of copying a manuscript; e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ , a codex containing 1 and 2 Peter amongst various other works is clearly copied by a non-professional scribe. In addition, *The Shepherd of Hermas* recounts how Hermas copied a book himself even though he admits “I copied the whole thing, letter by letter, for I could not distinguish between the syllables” (2.1.4). It is unclear whether Hermas should be viewed as typical of Christian practice, but it should be noted that this same practice also occurred in the Greco-Roman world; e.g., Atticus mentions a scribe that he uses on occasion that cannot follow whole sentences but where words must be given “syllable by syllable” (*Att.* 13.25).

named Athenagoras and, at the same time, copied literary texts such as *Chaereas and Callirhoe*.<sup>86</sup> Cicero also employed scribes who not only received dictated letters and copied letters, but also copied various literary works; and the scribes were often mentioned by name (*Att.* 4.16; 12.14; 13.25). One of the earliest Christian uses of such a scribe can be seen in Paul's use of an amanuensis, Tertius, who also is identified by name in Rom 16:22: "I, Tertius, the one writing this letter, greet you all in the Lord."<sup>87</sup> Thus, there are reasons to think Christians would have had ready access to professional scribal assistance, either by way of hiring scribes to do work, by using slaves who were scribes and owned by well-to-do Christians, or by using scribes who had converted to Christianity and were willing to provide secretarial assistance. Hanes-Eitzen notes, "There is no reason to suppose that literate Christians who wished for copies of literature had substantially different resources from those of other literate folk in the empire."<sup>88</sup> As for whether private (as opposed to commercial) copying would necessitate a drop in quality, Gamble declares, "There is no reason to think that commercially produced books were of higher quality than privately made copies. Indeed, frequent complaints suggest they were often worse."<sup>89</sup> He goes on to note, "The *private* copyists ... were as a rule more skilled than those employed by booksellers."<sup>90</sup>

## 2.2. Publication and Circulation of Christian Books

The concept of "private" copying, as discussed above, can give the impression that all instances of Christian book production were done on a small scale and done separately and disconnected from each other—as if all scribal activity in early Christianity was a random, haphazard affair. Although we do not have clear evidence that there were established "scriptoriums" in the second and third centuries, it would be misleading to suggest there were no instances during this time where copying happened on a larger scale or within a more highly organized network. Indeed, the early and dominant use of the codex and *nomina sacra* (as discussed above) already inclines us to recognize that early Christian book production (and

<sup>86</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 32.

<sup>87</sup> In several other places, Paul mentions portions of the letter are in his own hand (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 5:11; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17, showing that the prior portions were written by a scribe (Richards, *Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 172–175).

<sup>88</sup> Hanes-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 91.

<sup>90</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 93; emphasis mine.

distribution) may have had a more integrated and collaborative structure than we might otherwise have assumed. Let us consider a number of other factors that support this contention.

First, even within the letters of Paul, we witness a remarkably well-structured network for the copying and dissemination of early Christian writings. Paul sent his letters through friends or associates to be delivered to the various churches under his care (e.g., Rom 16:1; Eph 6:21; Col 4:7), and regularly asked that they be read publicly to the church (e.g., 2 Cor 2:9; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).<sup>91</sup> This public reading was analogous to the *recitatio* in the Greco-Roman world where a book was read aloud to groups and acquaintances as a form of “publishing” it to wider communities.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, it seems Paul expected his letters to be copied and circulated amongst the churches. For example, Galatians is addressed to a *region* of churches, “the churches of Galatia,” and Romans is addressed to “all God’s beloved in Rome,” which would likely have included many smaller churches. It is unlikely that each of these sub-churches received the *original* letter of Paul; undoubtedly copies were made. Also, Paul expressly asks that his letter to the Colossians be passed along to the Laodiceans, presumably by making copies (Col 4:16). Such a scenario reveals a fairly impressive network of churches that would have been actively copying and distributing Paul’s letters, even within Paul’s own lifetime. In addition, recent studies have shown that Paul would have undoubtedly possessed copies of his own letters, as was common in the Greco-Roman world, and may have even published one of the earliest collections of his letters.<sup>93</sup>

A second example can be found in the *Shepherd of Hermas* where Hermas receives the following instructions:

---

<sup>91</sup> For discussion of reading books in early Christian worship, see Martin Hengel, “The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark,” in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 64–84. See also Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67:3.

<sup>92</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 84.

<sup>93</sup> E. Randolph Richards, “The Codex and the Early Collection of Paul’s Letters,” *BBR* 8 (1998): 151–166; David Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 100–101. Cicero illumines the Greco-Roman practice of keeping copies of (and even publishing) one’s own letters, “There is no collection of my letters, but Tiro has about seventy, and some can be got from you. Those I ought to see and correct, and then they may be published” (*Att.* 16.5.5). Also, as Plutarch records, after Alexander set fire to his secretary’s tent he regretted the fact that all the copies of his letters were destroyed; so much so that he sent new letters to various people asking for copies of the letters he had originally sent (*Eum.* 2.2–3).

And so, you will write two little books, sending one to Clement and one to Grapte. Clement will send his to the foreign cities, for that is his commission. But, Grapte will admonish the widows and orphans. And you will read yours in the city, with the presbyters who lead the church. (Hermas 2.4-3)

This passage reveals an impressively organized system for publication and distribution of Christian literature, likely by the early second century.<sup>94</sup> After making two copies of the revelation he has received (“two little books”), Hermas is to give those copies to two selected individuals who will then make copies for their constituencies, while Hermas takes the book to his own constituency (“the presbyters”). It is clear that Clement and Grapte are secretaries or correspondents of sorts given the special task of making sure these texts are copied and distributed (“for that is his commission”).<sup>95</sup> In fact, Gamble refers to Clement’s role here as an “ecclesiastical publisher, a standing provision in the Roman church for duplicating and distributing texts to Christian communities elsewhere.”<sup>96</sup> And if Rome retained such a system for copying, publishing, and circulating Christian literature, then we might reasonably expect other major Christian centers like Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Caesarea to have similar structures.<sup>97</sup>

Third, we learn more about early publication and circulation practices in the early second-century letter of Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna to the Philipians to which he attached the collected letters of Ignatius.<sup>98</sup> The historical details surrounding this letter from Polycarp tell us that after Ignatius had written various letters to churches (some of which he wrote from Smyrna),

---

<sup>94</sup> For discussion of the date of the *Shepherd*, see *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Bart D. Ehrman; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 2:165–169.

<sup>95</sup> It is unclear whether or not the “Clement” here is intended to be an allusion to the writer of 1 Clement. Regardless, it is clear that this individual is charged with the copying and distribution of books, whether he does it himself or has scribes at his disposal who will perform the task. Either way, a well-established publishing network is still visible here.

<sup>96</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 109; emphasis mine.

<sup>97</sup> The fact that these major Christian centers contained established Christian libraries makes publication and copying resources all the more likely. For example, the library at Caesarea was established by the early third century (Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 112; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.32.25), and contained extensive resources for copying, editing, and publishing biblical manuscripts (some colophons in biblical manuscripts, like Sinaiticus, indicate manuscripts were collated and corrected there even by Pamphilus and Eusebius themselves). Jerusalem also contained a library by the early third century (*Hist. eccl.* 6.20.1), and most likely Alexandria as well (as can be seen by the extensive literary work and possible “catechetical school” in Alexandria under Pantaeus, Clement, and Origen; *Hist. eccl.* 5.10, 6.3.3). For more discussion, see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 155–159.

<sup>98</sup> For dating and other introductory detail, see Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2:324–331.

the following occurred within a very short frame of time:<sup>99</sup> (i) the Philippians sent a letter to Polycarp asking for a copy of Ignatius's letters and also sent along another letter for Polycarp to forward onto Antioch (*Phil.* 13.1–2); (ii) next Polycarp collected the epistles of Ignatius and had them copied; (iii) then Polycarp sent a letter back to the Philippians with a copy of Ignatius's letter collection; (iv) and finally, at the same time, Polycarp forwarded a letter from the Philippians' onto Antioch—something he appeared to be doing for many churches (*Phil.* 13.1–2).<sup>100</sup> This dizzying amount of literary traffic raises two important points: (a) Smyrna appears to have been a veritable “beehive” of activity in regard to letter-writing, copying, and distribution, showing that they not only had the scribal infrastructure to handle this sort of activity, but an ecclesiastical network between churches that made such activity a necessity.<sup>101</sup> (b) Given the short time frame in which Polycarp was able to collect Ignatius' seven letters, it appears this could only have been done if Polycarp *already* had copies of the letters that Ignatius had sent from Smyrna when the Philippians made their request. This suggests that when Ignatius originally wrote from Smyrna, copies of his letters must have been made before they were sent out (and those copies were then stored at Smyrna).<sup>102</sup> Indeed, this is suggested by Polycarp's statement that he is sending not only the letters that “[Ignatius] sent to us” but “*all the others we had with us*” (*Phil.* 13.1). Not only does this scenario suggest that Smyrna was somewhat of a publishing “hub,” but it reflects a similar pattern that we saw in Paul's epistles—authors often made copies of their letters before they were sent so that later collections could be made and published.

Fourth, we continue to learn about the transmission and publication of early Christian books in the account of the scribal resources available to Origen in Alexandria in the early third century. According to Eusebius, Ambrose had supplied Origen with a well-staffed literary team including “seven shorthand-writers ... many copyists ... [and] girls skilled in penmanship” (*Hist. eccl.* 6.23.2). It appears that Ambrose supplied this literary team so that Origen's work could be extensively copied, corrected, and

<sup>99</sup> Gamble suggests no more than a couple of weeks (*Books and Readers*, 110).

<sup>100</sup> Apparently the Philippians' request to have Polycarp forward a letter to Antioch was part of a larger pattern of churches sending letters to Polycarp to forward to Antioch. These letters were being sent at the behest of Ignatius who asked that letters be sent to Antioch (*Smyrn.* 11.3).

<sup>101</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 112.

<sup>102</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 110–111.

published for the benefit of the church—which undoubtedly explains Origen’s impressive level of literary production. Although it is possible that Origen’s situation was entirely unique, it is not hard to imagine that similar publication “centers” would have existed elsewhere. Surely Ambrose was not the only Christian with financial means who had an interest in seeing Christian books produced in greater quantities. It would be quite natural to think that Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian and other Christian leaders may have enjoyed similar resources.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, if such resources would be allocated to make sure Origen’s works were adequately copied, it seems reasonable to think that similar, or even greater, levels of resources would have been employed (at least in some instances) by Christians in the copying of books they considered to be *Scripture*.<sup>104</sup>

Fifth, the voluminous literary production and distribution at Oxyrhynchus in the second and third centuries—demonstrated by the vast discoveries of papyri at that site—indicate the likelihood that the Christian community there possessed substantial resources for copying, editing, and publishing.<sup>105</sup> Remarkably, Oxyrhynchus has provided over 40% of our New Testament papyri (more than any other single location), covering at least 15 of our 27 New Testament books,<sup>106</sup> and many of these papyri date to

---

<sup>103</sup> Indeed, a number of details suggest this possibility. Irenaeus produced *Adversus haereses* in multiple stages and yet it found its way around the empire quite rapidly in its completed form, suggesting substantial scribal and publishing resources in Gaul (more on this below). The third edition of Tertullian’s work, *Adversus Marcionem*, so quickly replaced the prior two editions that it must have been copied quickly and in great quantities, suggesting again that substantial publishing resources must have been available in Carthage to publish such a lengthy work in this fashion (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 121). As for Cyprian, not only were his collected works published soon after his death—accounting for why so many survived—but he seemed to promote the copying and dissemination of works during his own lifetime (*Ep.* 32), again implying a degree of scribal resources at his disposal.

<sup>104</sup> Although the extent of the canon was not yet resolved by the end of the second century, by that time there was a core set of New Testament books that would have been highly esteemed and regarded as “Scripture” alongside the Old Testament. See, Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67:3; Barton, *Spirit and the Letter*, 18; Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 254.

<sup>105</sup> Eldon J. Epp, “The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus in their social and intellectual context,” in William L. Petersen (ed.), *Sayings of Jesus: Canonical and Non-Canonical* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 47–68; Peter M. Head, “Some Recently Published NT Papyri From Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment,” *TynBul* 51 (2000): 1–16. For more on the site of Oxyrhynchus as a whole, see AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); P.J. Parsons, et al. (eds.), *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007); Turner, “Roman Oxyrhynchus,” 78–93.

<sup>106</sup> Epp, “The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus,” 52. According to Peter Head, there were 47 New Testament papyri from Oxyrhynchus when the total count was 115 (“Some

the second or third centuries.<sup>107</sup> Oxyrhynchus has also provided numerous non-biblical Christian writings from this time period such as the *Gospel of Thomas* (P.Oxy. 1, 654, 655), an unknown gospel (P.Oxy. 1224), the *Gospel of Mary* (P.Oxy. 3525, P.Ryl. III.463), the *Gospel of Peter* (P.Oxy. 2949, 4009<sup>108</sup>), the *Sophia Jesu Christi* (P.Oxy. 1081), *Shepherd of Hermas* (P.Oxy. 404, 1828, 3527, 3528), Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (P.Oxy. 405), an anti-Jewish dialogue (P.Oxy. 2070), and many other Christian works, suggesting that Oxyrhynchus was likely a “Christian intellectual center.”<sup>109</sup> In addition to Christian writings, the extensive publication capacity at Oxyrhynchus is also manifested in the vast amounts of non-Christian literary texts also discovered there such as Aristotle, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Homer, Plato, Plutarch, Sophocles, Thucydides, and many others—all of which date in the first or second centuries.<sup>110</sup> So compelling is the intellectual and literary environment at Oxyrhynchus that Roberts was led to declare that a Christian

---

Recently Published NT Papyri,” 6). With the addition of P.Oxy. 4803, 4804, 4805, 4806, 4844, and 4845, the total count of New Testament papyri from Oxyrhynchus is 53. Thus, 53 out of the overall 124 New Testament papyri come from Oxyrhynchus (42%). Of course, this is just an approximate number because it does not account for the fact that some of the more recently discovered papyri are actually portions of prior known manuscripts (e.g., P.Oxy. 4405 is a new portion of  $\mathfrak{P}^{77}$ ). Though done at an earlier point, this same percentage is reached by Eldon Jay Epp, “The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: ‘Not Without Honor Except in Their Hometown?’,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 12. When one considers the fact that many of our NT papyri have unknown provenances (e.g.  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ ), and may have actually come from Oxyrhynchus, then this percentage could be even higher.

<sup>107</sup> E.g., relatively recent Oxyrhynchus discoveries P.Oxy. 4403 and 4404 contain noticeable serifs and consequently have been dated to the late second/early third century.

<sup>108</sup> Dieter Lührmann, “P.Oxy. 2949: EvPet 3–5 in einer Handschrift des 2/3 Jahrhunderts,” *ZNW* 72 (1981): 216–226; Dieter Lührmann, “P.Oxy. 4009: Ein neues Fragment des Petrus-evangeliums?,” *NovT* 35 (1993): 390–410. Recently, the identification of these fragments with the *Gospel of Peter* has been challenged by Paul Foster, “Are there any Early Fragments of the So-Called *Gospel of Peter*?,” *NTS* 52 (2006): 1–28.

<sup>109</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 24 n5. For a more detailed catalogue of Oxyrhynchus papyri, see Julian Krüger, *Oxyrhynchus in der Kaiserzeit: Studien zur Topographie und Literaturrezeption* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

<sup>110</sup> Epp, “The New Testament Papyri at Oxyrhynchus,” 60. The documentary papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus continue to support the idea that there was extensive copying and publishing of literary works at this site; e.g., P.Lond.inv. 2110, a second-century letter likely from Oxyrhynchus, details payments to a scribe for copying literary works. Roberts declares that this letter (and others like it) suggests “there was a good deal of actual copying of classical texts, perhaps in a scriptorium or a library, at Oxyrhynchus itself” (“Roman Oxyrhynchus,” 90). This is supported by the vast amount of papyrus sold at Oxyrhynchus as shown by other documentary papyri (e.g. P.Oxy. 1142, 1727). Dirk Obbink declares that “the Oxyrhynchus papyri abundantly provide the basis ... for concluding that it was a lively center of learning in the first four centuries AD” (“Readers and Intellectuals,” in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts*, ed. A.K. Bowman, et al. [London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007], 281).



scriptorium at Oxyrhynchus was “not unlikely” by the time we reach the third century.<sup>111</sup> Whether or not we want to call this a “scriptorium” along with Roberts is unclear; however, the extensive archaeological evidence at Oxyrhynchus at least suggests that in the second and third centuries there was a substantially developed system for copying, publishing and distributing early Christian literature.<sup>112</sup>

These five examples—and many others could be added—point towards a publishing environment within the first three centuries of the Christian movement that, while not necessarily at the level of “scriptoria,” is nevertheless quite organized, developed, and intentional. Such a reality is borne out by the early evidence for the rapid dissemination of Christian literature within these centuries. P.Oxy. 405, a copy of *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus dated to the late second century, was discovered in Egypt only about 20 years after its initial composition in Gaul in c. 180. Likewise, the *Shepherd of Hermas* which was composed in Rome in the mid-second century was discovered in Egypt in a late-second century manuscript (P.Mich. 130).<sup>113</sup> P<sup>52</sup> was discovered in Egypt and dates to only a few years after the original composition in the late first century.<sup>114</sup> It is precisely this rapid dissemination that sets Christian literature apart from its Greco-Roman counterparts—Christians enjoyed an expansive and well-established network of churches, groups, and individuals that were not only interested in the copying and publication of Christian writings but apparently had the means at their disposal for that publication to take place.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Roberts, *Manuscript*, 24.

<sup>112</sup> A further illustration of this literary environment amongst Christians at Oxyrhynchus is the fourth-century Christian letter (P.Oxy. 4365) detailing the exchange of books between Christians—in this case the deuterocanonical books of *Jubilees* and *4 Ezra*—evidently for the sake of knowledge and personal study. Though this letter is a little later than our targeted date range (second and third centuries), it is still illustrative of the overall Oxyrhynchus environment from the perspective of Christian documentary papyri. For more discussion, see Epp, “The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri,” 21–31; and Thomas Kraus, “The Lending of Books in the Fourth Century C.E.P.Oxy. LXIII 4365—A Letter on Papyrus and the Reciprocal Lending of Literature Having Become Apocryphal,” in Thomas Kraus, *Ad Fontes: Original Manuscripts and Their Significance for Studying Early Christianity—Selected Essays* (TENTS 3; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007), 185–206.

<sup>113</sup> For more on this text, see Campbell Bonner, “A New Fragment of the Shepherd of Hermas, Michigan Papyrus 44,” *HTR* 20 (1927): 105–116.

<sup>114</sup> The rapid dissemination of P<sup>52</sup> becomes even more impressive if one adopts the earlier date of CE 100 defended by K. Aland, “Neue neutestamentliche Papyri II,” *NTS* 9 (1962–1963): 303–316.

<sup>115</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 140–141. For more on the circulation of ancient manuscripts, see Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” 35–56.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The above survey, although far too brief and limited in scope, reveals that earliest Christianity was not a religion concerned only with oral tradition or public proclamation, but was also shaped by, and found its identity within, a vivid “textual culture” committed to writing, editing, copying, and distributing Christian books, whether scriptural or otherwise. When the form and structure of these books is considered, and not just the content within, a more vivid picture of the early Christian literary culture begins to emerge. From a very early point, Christians not only had an interest in books, but had a relatively well-developed social and scribal network—as seen in conventions like the codex and *nomina sacra*—whereby those books could be copied, edited, and disseminated throughout the empire. Indeed, it is just this rapid transfer of literature that set early Christians apart from their surrounding Greco-Roman world, and set the early church on the path toward eventually establishing a collection of “canonical” books that would form the church’s literary foundation for generations to come.