Indicators of ‘Catholicity’ in Early Gospel Manuscripts

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THE TWO INDICATORS

The remarkable Christian preference for the codex has often been noted. All of the ‘early’ (i.e. dated up to the third/fourth century) manuscripts of the canonical gospels discovered to date come from papyrus codices with the exception of one roll (Π22) and one parchment codex (0171). Of more significance is the recent discovery that Christians produced early canonical gospels in standard-sized codices. In the second and second/third centuries the preferred size for gospel codices approximated the small Turner Group 9.1 format (W11.5–14 cm × H at least 3 cm higher than W), while in the third century a size approximating the taller but still portable 8.2 Group format (W12–14 cm × H not quite twice W) predominated (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2 below). This finding is remarkable given that other early Christian codices were not produced in these formats. While the codex was the preferred format for the production of canonical gospels, the preference was not universal. Other types of manuscripts were also produced by early Christians, including the roll and the codex with a restricted page size (the ‘square’ format).


3 All of the 2nd- and 2nd/3rd-cent. codices including Π108 are of similar size. The 9.1 subgroup is slightly taller than the ‘square’ Group 9, while Group 10 is only a special case in a slightly smaller format of Group 9’ (E. G. Turner, The Typology of the Early Codex (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1977), 25). Likewise, there is little difference between subgroup 8.2 and Group 8 codices (ibid. 20–2).

4 Examination of the other early Christian codices in Turner’s Typology reveals that none of the small number of 2nd/3rd-cent. Christian MSS (OT 36, OT 7, OT 9) have the same format as
vehicle for Christian texts in general, gospels seem to have been regarded as a special category. Early Christians acknowledged their importance by using standard-sized codices.

Early Christian use of the unique convention known as nomina sacra is also well-known. Roberts argued that there was early consensus about conventional treatment of the four nomina divina (Θεός, Ιησούς, Χριστός, Κύριος) which was then extended to other words. He explained inconsistency in applying contraction by scribal difficulty in ascertaining whether the referent, meaning, or context was sacred or mundane. This was certainly a factor in the very earliest period, but there is a better explanation for apparent inconsistency in the period covered by our manuscripts. It was decided in the second century that the words causing the interpretative difficulties should be systematically contracted regardless of whether the referent, meaning, or context was sacred or mundane. The goal of this inclusive approach was to bring an end to inappropriate contraction.

When both of these things are considered—standard-sized gospel codices and standardization in the use of nomina sacra—the notion of ‘catholic’ consensus among early Christians becomes more than plausible. Given the evidence that he marshalled, Roberts probably overreached in arguing that there was a significant ‘degree of organization, of conscious planning, and uniformity of practice’ in the early church. But the early gospel manuscript

2nd/3rd-cent. gospels (Turner Group 9.1). In the 3rd cent., four codices (OT 9, 126, 529, and OT 183/207a) are in Turner’s Group 8 like several gospels (110, 117, and 112), but only OT 75A is in Turner Group 8.2, the preferred size for 3rd-cent. gospels. Moreover, most 3rd- and 3rd/4th-cent. Christian codices are in various other sizes.

For bibliography and a recent overview see Hurtado, Earliest Christian Artifacts, 95–134.

In the context of Roberts’ views, the nomina sacra represent a nascent Christian creed, a kind of 1st-cent. identity statement (Manuscript, 28). Along similar lines Hurtado argues that the four earliest nomina sacra appear to give visual expression to the ‘binitarian shape’ of earliest Christian piety and devotion (Earliest Christian Artifacts, 106, citing his earlier work including Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 134–53).

My own research has shown that in 2nd- and 3rd-cent. gospel MSS πνεύμα is virtually part of Robert’s class (1) and πατήρ is edging into his class (2): see S. D. Charlesworth, ‘Consensus Standardization in the Systematic Approach to Nomina Sacra in Second- and Third-Century Gospel Manuscripts’, Aegyptus, 86 (2006): 37–68.

For Roberts’ views, see Manuscript, 27. V. Martin and R. Kasser, Papyrus Bodmer XIV: Evangile de Luc chap. 3–24 (Cologny-Genève: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1961), 18–19, agree that use of contractions led inevitably to scribal confusion. In contrast, Hurtado contends that there are only ‘a comparatively small number of variations and inconsistencies’ and that we should not have unrealistic expectations of ancient scribes (Earliest Christian Artifacts, 127). For a negative view of inconsistency see C. M. Tuckett, ‘‘Nomina Sacra”: Yes and No?’, in J.-M. Auwers and H. J. Jonge, eds., The Biblical Canons (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 431–58.

For bibliography and a recent overview see Hurtado, Earliest Christian Artifacts, 95–134.
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Evidence now supports this conclusion. The two indicators of ‘catholicity’ outlined here prove that there was consensus and collaboration between early Christian groups. However, the same manuscript evidence also shows that collaboration had its limits. Variation between manuscripts in the words that were systematically contracted and in the use of lectional aids makes this clear. Therefore, the term ‘catholicity’, which as used here has no reference to later periods, should be understood to connote cooperative collaboration and not hierarchical uniformity. All of this has far-reaching implications for the ‘heterodox’-dominant view of early Christianity.

**SYSTEMATIC CONTRACTION OF NOMINA SACRA**

In early gospel manuscripts the sacred-contraction/mundane-\(\text{plene}\) distinction is always maintained as regards \(\text{θεός}\), and is not an issue with \(\text{Ἰησοῦς}\) and \(\text{Χριστός}\). But \(\text{kύριος}\) presented an interpretative problem. For example, when a slave is found to be faithful and wise at the coming of his owner, should \(\text{kύριος}\) be contracted or not (Matt. 24: 45–7)? Though the immediate context is strictly mundane or non-sacred, \(\text{kύριος}\) might be considered sacred in wider context because it is the Son of Man, who will come unexpectedly (v. 44). Likewise, who is the \(\text{kύριος}\) who goes to a far country to receive a kingdom and then return (Luke 19: 12–27, esp. 16, 18, 20, 25)? When other words like \(\text{πνεύμα}\) and \(\text{πατήρ}\) were added, scribes would have encountered even more problems in deciding whether or not the context required contraction. For instance, does the \(\text{πατήρ}\) of the prodigal son have a sacred referent (Luke 15: 18–24, 32)? And what about the kingdom of heaven being like a certain king who made a marriage for \(\text{πω νικώ}\) (Matt. 22: 2)? The resultant interpretive blunders led to ‘standardization’ in the use of nomina sacra. This probably took place in the second half of the second century and involved systematic or wholesale contraction of \(\text{kύριος}\) and several other words such as \(\text{πνεύμα}\) and \(\text{πατήρ}\).\(^\text{10}\)

For example, in \(\text{𝔓}^\text{66}\) every occurrence of \(\text{kύριος}\) is contracted. (In the following examples sacred are followed by mundane occurrences and separated by a double bar. Compendia are listed in the order nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, and dative cases.)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{κύριος} & (4), \text{κύριος} (18), \text{κύριος} (5), \text{κύριος} (2) \parallel \text{κύριος} (15: 15), \text{κύριος} (4: 11, 15, 19; 5: 7; 9: 36; 12: 21), \text{κύριος} (20: 15), \text{κύριος} (13: 16; 15: 20)
\end{align*}
\]

Something similar is happening in the treatment of \(\text{πατήρ}\).

\(^{10}\) For a much more detailed discussion of what follows see Charlesworth, ‘Consensus Standardization’, 37–68.
The same phenomenon occurs in Hebrew. 

- $\pi\nu\eta\nu$ (37), $\pi\nu\gamma\mu\rho\nu\nu$, $\nu\nu\rho\nu\nu$ (5), $\nu\nu\nu\nu$, $\nu\nu\nu\nu$ (28), $\nu\pi\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha$ (14:16), $\nu\pi\pi\tau\rho\epsilon\alpha$ (12), $\pi\tau\rho\nu\nu$ (6: 45), $\nu\nu\pi\nu\nu$ (7) || $\pi\nu\gamma\mu\rho\nu\nu$ (4: 53), $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ (6: 42; 8: 39, 56), $\nu\nu\nu\tau\rho\epsilon\tau\rho\nu\nu\nu$ (4: 20), $\nu\pi\tau\epsilon\rho\nu\nu\nu$ (6: 49, 58), $\pi\tau\rho\nu\nu$ (8: 44, 53), $\nu\nu\nu\tau\rho\epsilon\alpha$ (4: 12; 8: 38, 41, 44), $\pi\nu\tau\epsilon\rho\nu\nu\nu$ (7: 22)

Again there seems to be an effort to be comprehensive. However, a number of *plene* occurrences of the word eluded the scribe. Some 3/93 sacred and 6/14 mundane instances were left uncontracted. Association with four divine names might have inspired extension of conventional treatment to other words. For example, the Jews sought even more to put Christ to death because $\nu\nu\pi\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu$ (5: 18). The same background motivation might have led to a mundane contraction at 6: 42, where the scribe has written $\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\nu\n
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Again pious scribal activity may be gravitating outward from the *nomina divina* and extending sacred contraction to associated words. For example, sacred context (*ἐν προσευχῇ καὶ ἀληθείᾳ* (John 4: 23). But all other instances (Luke 4: 36; 6: 18; 8: 29; 9: 39, 42; 10: 20; 11: 24, 26) except one (*πνεύματα*, Luke 13: 11) refer to evil or unclean spirits, yet are contracted and overstroked. As with the contracted use of παράδειγμα when referring to Satan in P46, there can be no confusion of sacred and mundane distinctions in these cases. Rather, the scribe is treating every occurrence of the word conventionally because of association with the Holy Spirit. That is why the woman had suffered a ἀσθένεια of infirmity for eighteen years (Luke 13: 11).

The presence of the same approach in all of the larger continuous gospel manuscripts suggests that most were produced in small copying centres14 where ‘policy’ dictated some aspects of production.15 The wholesale approach to contraction represents an effort to produce ‘standard’ copies of manuscripts (although the usual textual variation would still apply). The further implication is that there was agreement in various places to contract these words systematically. Thus, the manuscripts themselves point to a higher degree of communication and collaboration between early Christian communities and their copying centres than has often been allowed.16

Conventional approaches to manuscript production, in terms of codex size and the wholesale contraction of *nomina sacra*, are indicative of an inter-connected ‘catholic’ church in the second half of the second century. (The use of *nomina sacra* by itself cannot be considered an indicator of catholicity because compendia occur in virtually every kind of Christian text and document.) However, the evidence does not appear to support the idea that a conciliar directive specified exactly what words were to be systematically contracted. Rather, variation in the words so treated from manuscript to manuscript suggests that there was consensus adoption of a limited number of words. P46 and P45 contract κύριος, πνεῦμα, παράδειγμα, εὐαγγέλια, and εὐαγγέλιον systematically,17 while P75 treats κυρίος, πνεῦμα, and Ἰεραρχά

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14 See A. Mugridge, ‘What is a Scriptorium?’, in J. Frösén et al., eds., *Proceedings of the 24th International Congress of Papyrology, Helsinki, 1–7 August, 2004* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2007), 781–92, who shows that the word ‘scriptorium’ or a Greek equivalent was not used in the early period.

15 P45 is the exception: see Charlesworth (‘Public and Private’, 163–7) and Table 2.2 below.


17 Note that both εὐαγγέλιον and εὐαγγέλιον occur only once in P45.
systematically, but not παμή, εσταυρός, and εσταυρώω. Such differences illustrate that ‘catholic’ collaboration took the form of consensus, rather than formal, detailed agreement. This conclusion is confirmed by the variety of text division markers used in controlled settings.

OTHER ASPECTS OF CHRISTIAN SCRIBAL CULTURE

The codices in Table 2.1 share a number of common characteristics—uniformity in size, hands in the semi-literate to (formative) biblical majuscule range, and the use of text division and punctuation as readers’ aids. When these three factors are present as a group, especially in tandem with checking and correction, the manuscript was probably produced in a ‘controlled’ setting for public use in Christian gatherings (perhaps, as mentioned above, in small copy centres comprised of two or more scribes). All of these things add up to quality control. Systematic contraction (not simply the presence) of nomina sacra may be another sign of controlled production. It implies production that is to some extent policy-driven, something that quality control also implies.

In contrast, codices with informal or documentary hands which lack features conducive to public reading, even though they may be conventional in size, were probably copied in uncontrolled settings for private use. For example, the unconventional sizes of $\text{P}^{52}$ and $\text{P}^{45}$ point to uncontrolled production. The same is true of $\text{P}^{111}$, $\text{P}^{119}$, and $\text{P}^{37}$, but like the remaining third-century codices there are additional reasons for their ‘private’ designation—

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18 Readers’ aids, lectional signs, and punctuation were developed from the 2nd cent. BC onwards to assist word recognition within continuous rows of letters: G. Cavallo and H. Maehler, *Hellenistic Bookhands* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 17, 19–21. For detailed discussion of what follows see Charlesworth, ‘Public and Private’, 149–52.


20 Charlesworth, ‘Consensus Standardization’, 66. $\text{P}^{65}$, which has been designated private/uncontrolled, is an exception: see n. 15.

21 We can visualize broad but non-exclusive categories of 2nd- and 3rd-cent. hands ranging from literary and semi-literate through informal to documentary and scholarly. W. A. Johnson’s three categories of hands parallel those used here: (1) ‘formal, semi-formal, or pretentious’; (2) ‘informal and unexceptional’; (3) ‘substandard or cursive’. *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 102; cf. 161. The vast majority of literary rolls in his samples fall into the first and second categories.

22 The categories of ‘public/controlled’ and ‘private/uncontrolled’ should not be seen as inflexible classifications to be imposed on the evidence. A manuscript might be used in both public and private settings, or an individual might make or obtain a copy of a ‘public’ manuscript for ‘private’ use or vice versa. But, in general, the documentary evidence can be divided into public and private categories.
informal or documentary hands and a lack of punctuation and readers’ aids. Yet in most cases standard sizes were still preferred, suggesting that convention was strong enough to dictate size even as the number of private copies of the gospels increased. Perhaps the same thing might be said of systematic contraction of
nomina sacra because it occurs in ‘private’ manuscripts like  \( \mathbb{P}45 \). But this cannot be verified because only singular instances of contraction in mundane contexts occur in less well-preserved papyri.\(^{23}\)

The ‘culture of standardization’ visible in the two ‘catholic’ indicators discussed above did not extend to these other aspects of scribal culture. This is perhaps understandable when manuscripts were being copied in private/uncontrolled settings. But even among public/controlled manuscripts there is no standardized use of punctuation and readers’ aids. In the case of text division, local approaches seem to have had precedence over what may have pertained elsewhere. The use of text division seems to have been both conventional and individual in that practice varied at the local level. As with variation in the words that were systematically contracted, the degree of collaboration evident in the standardized features of early gospels needs to be qualified by the implications of conventional, but far from systematized, text division. That is, ‘standardization’ seems to have proceeded so far and no further, and this may be illustrative of the situation at large, which can be described as informal sharing or ‘consensus’ rather than formal agreement.

\(^{23}\) The sole contractions in mundane contexts of \( \pi\nu\epsilon\dot{\iota}\varphi\alpha\varsigma\lambda\alpha \) in \( \mathbb{P}14 \) (\( \varphi\varpi\pi \)) and \( \mathbb{P}137 \) (\( \varphi\varpi[\pi] \)) and of \( \delta\vartheta\rho\alpha\varphi\omicron\omicron\varsigma\omicron \) in \( \mathbb{P}22 \) (\( \varphi\varpi\pi \)) and \( \mathbb{P}69 \) (\( \varphi\varpi\pi \)) may or may not be evidence of systematic contraction. Note that of these four MSS only \( \mathbb{P}14 \) has been designated public/controlled.
Conservative scribal desire for a shared culture is evident on another front. Cavallo and Maehler have used the Herculaneum papyri in particular to contribute to the reconstruction of a typology of scripts that is Hellenistic rather than Ptolemaic. Their analysis demonstrates that literary scripts of the Hellenistic and early Roman period ‘developed along very similar lines’ in Egypt and southern Italy (Herculaneum). Indeed, there may have been, to use their word, a koiné of Greek literary scripts across the Mediterranean world. The implication is that literary scripts were common scribal property, like the Christian scribal conventions discussed above.

The ancient world lacked ‘an organised and systematic system for the conveyance of personal correspondence’. Individual senders had to look out for travellers, known or otherwise, who may or may not be reliable, to deliver their letters. Paul preferred to use associates, who often doubled as his emissaries, as letter-carriers (see 1 Cor. 4: 17; 2 Cor. 8: 16–24; 9: 3–5; Phil. 2: 25–30; cf. Eph. 6: 21–2; Col. 4: 7–9). But from the second century AD letter-carriers were apparently not too hard to find since correspondents are ‘quick to accuse each other of neglect in writing’. Gospel manuscripts must have moved around the Roman world by the same means. For example, if P52 were copied in or came to Egypt soon after it was copied, the Gospel of John, though apparently written in western Asia Minor, was known in Egypt by (or before) the middle of the second century. Rather than just being examples

24 Cavallo and Maehler, Hellenistic Bookhands, 6. Texts written in Greek have also been found in Derveni (Macedonia) and Qumran.
26 Cavallo and Maehler suggest that this may have been ‘due to intensified cultural exchanges as a result of more intense political and economic relations between the Romans and the Hellenistic world’ (Hellenistic Bookhands, 16).
28 ‘The wealthy could send their own slaves or avail themselves of independent couriers, the so-called tabellarii ... There were also private tax collectors ... [who] maintained their own courier service which they shared with others for a price. Family members, friends, merchants, soldiers—all could be given letters when they went on journeys’ (ibid. 63).
31 See Irenaeus, Haer. 3.1.1.
32 Roberts urged caution but listed an impressive array of papyrological authorities who supported his 100–150 dating: see C. H. Roberts, An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel
of local texts, manuscripts of Egyptian provenance probably represent gospel texts from around the Mediterranean world. Thus, shared scripts and the mobility of manuscripts provide further support for the idea that the two scribal conventions under discussion are indeed indicators of ‘catholicity’.

‘CATHOLIC’ AND ‘ORTHODOX’?

The evidence for later second- and second/third-century ‘catholicity’ presents real problems for the Bauer thesis. Did the Gnostic, Montanist, and Marcionite groups, which he claims dominated early Christianity, reach a consensus about conventional approaches to manuscript production in the second half of the second century? This is highly improbable when each group was busy insisting on its own version of Christianity and when early non-canonical gospel papyri are private manuscripts without indications of catholicity.


33 So e.g. K.W. Clark, The Gentile Bias and Other Essays (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 127: ‘All the manuscripts so far discovered, including the most sensational of recent discoveries, may enable us to recover no more than the early text in Egypt.’


36 Bauer argued that in the 2nd cent. central and eastern Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Mesopotamia were dominated by heresy (Orthodoxy and Heresy, 170–2, 192–3). Indeed, ‘heresy constituted Christianity to such a degree that a confrontation with the ecclesiastical faith [i.e., orthodoxy] was not necessary and was scarcely even possible’ (p. 170).

37 Bauer wrongly asserts that each version of Christianity had its own gospel (Orthodoxy and Heresy, 203).

38 There are early papyri of two known non-canonical gospels: (1) Gospel of Thomas—P.Oxy. 4.654 (British Library, London, Pap. 1531), opisthographic roll; P.Oxy. 1.1 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Gr. th e. 7[P]), codex; P.Oxy. 4.655 (Houghton Library, Harvard University, SM 4367), roll. (2) Gospel of Mary—P.Oxy. 50.3525 (Papyrology Rooms, Sackler Library, Oxford), roll; P.Oxy. 3.463 (John Rylands Library, Manchester, Greek Papyrus 463), codex. Whether the following papyri are early evidence for the Gospel of Peter is contested—P.Oxy. 41.2949 (Papyrology Rooms, Sackler Library, Oxford), roll; P.Oxy. 60.4009 (Papyrology Rooms, Sackler Library, Oxford), codex. Of papyri possibly from unknown gospels, the so-called Egerton Gospel has received the most attention—P. Egerton inv. 2 (British Museum, London, P.Egerton 1/P.Lond. Christ. 1) + P.Köln 6.255 (Institut für Altertumskunde, Universität Köln, inv. 608), codex.

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Non-canonical gospels are also at a serious disadvantage in terms of frequency of citation\textsuperscript{40} and preservation.\textsuperscript{41} If the ‘heterodox’ were in the majority for so long, non-canonical gospels should have been preserved in greater numbers in Egypt.\textsuperscript{42} But the earliest papyri provide ‘no support for Bauer’s view’.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, scribal conventions in second- and second/third-century gospel papyri are indicative of ‘catholic’ collaboration and consensus, presumably among the ‘orthodox’.\textsuperscript{44}

As part of his imaginative analysis Bauer often assumed that literary texts represented larger Christian groups or factions and not just their authors.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40} If non-canonical gospels had as much or indeed more currency than the canonical gospels, we should expect to find frequent citations or allusions in the Apostolic Fathers and 2nd-cent. writers. But the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Peter are not cited by any known writer. Even the Gospel of Thomas has only two early 3rd-cent. citations: one which purports to be a quotation from the Gospel according to Thomas used by the Naassenes is more allusion than citation (Hipp., Haer. 5.7.20/GThomas 4, c.222–35), while the other (apparently from the same source) is again similar but worded quite differently (Hipp., Haer. 5.8.32/GThomas 11b). The only two close parallels are both 4th-cent. (Didymus, Comm. Ps. 88.8/GThomas 82; Macarius, Logia 55.5/GThomas 113). See H. W. Attridge, ‘The Greek Fragments’, in B. Layton (ed.), Nag Hammadi Codex II.2–7, together with XIII.2, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926 (1) and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 103–9; D. Lührmann with E. Schlarb, Fragmente apokryph gewordener Evangelien in griechischer und lateinischer Sprache (Marburg: Elwert, 2000), 131.

\textsuperscript{41} After excluding \textsuperscript{37} and including P. Papyrus inv. 2, in terms of preservation the four canonical gospels outnumber the four non-canonical gospels by more than 4 to 1 (35 canonical gospel to 8 non-canonical gospel fragments). If P. Oxy. 41.2949 and 60.4009 are not early fragments of the Gospel of Peter, the ratio is 5.8 to 1. When comparison is made with the Gospel of Thomas, the figures are: John (16), Matthew (12), Luke (6), Thomas (3), Mark (1). However, in terms of the conventional vehicle for gospels, Luke is preserved in six codices and the Gospel of Thomas in only one. Preference for Matthew probably explains the lack of Marcan papyri.

\begin{itemize}
\item II Matt (\textsuperscript{1} 41 + 67 \textsuperscript{2} 103 \textsuperscript{3} 104), John (\textsuperscript{1} 52 \textsuperscript{2} 90), G Peter (P. Oxy. 60.4009), Egerton P. 2 + P. Köln 6.255
\item II/III Luke (\textsuperscript{3} 9), John (\textsuperscript{1} 96), Peter (P. Oxy. 41.2949), G Thomas (P. Oxy. 1.1)
\item III Matt (\textsuperscript{1} 45 \textsuperscript{2} 131 \textsuperscript{3} 101), Mark (\textsuperscript{1} 38), Luke (\textsuperscript{1} 45 \textsuperscript{2} 169 \textsuperscript{3} 73 \textsuperscript{4} 111), John (\textsuperscript{1} 52 \textsuperscript{2} 28 \textsuperscript{3} 45 \textsuperscript{4} 79 \textsuperscript{5} 106 \textsuperscript{6} 107 \textsuperscript{7} 108 \textsuperscript{8} 109 \textsuperscript{9} 119 \textsuperscript{10} 121), G Thomas (P. Oxy. 4.654, 655), G Mary (P. Oxy. 50.3525, P. Ryl. 3.463)
\item III/IV Matt (\textsuperscript{1} 37 \textsuperscript{2} 106 \textsuperscript{3} 0171), Luke (0171)
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{42} See Roberts’s comments on the preservation of Gnostic papyri (\textit{Manuscript}, 51–2).


\textsuperscript{44} The terms ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heterodoxy’ carry too much baggage from the later period to encapsulate adequately the general naiveté of the earliest period. In general, earliest Christianity tolerated diversity. Proto-orthodoxy developed into orthodoxy through the escalating conflict with increasingly extreme heterodoxy.

Such an approach is only credible when there is sufficient weight of evidence. The combination of evidence adduced here shows that conventional textual practices were already established among ‘catholic’ Christians by the second half of the second century when standard-sized codices of the canonical gospels were being produced for public use in Christian gatherings. Despite an increase in the number of private manuscripts, a similar situation pertained in the third century. Questions about unity and diversity in relation to geographical areas will have to be left for others to answer.


47 Contra R. S. Bagnall, Early Christian Books in Egypt (Princeton: PUP, 2009), the standard sizes of 2nd- and 3rd-cent. gospel codices confirm the dates generally assigned by papyrologists.

48 Justin’s statement that the ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων (1 Apol. 67.3; Dial. 103.8, 106.3, etc.) ἀ καλεῖται ἐβαγγέλια (1 Apol. 66.3; cf. Dial. 10.2, 100.1) were read at mid-2nd-cent. Christian services for the instruction of those gathered (1 Apol. 67.3–4) appears to have had wider application than just Rome.