Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading
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Abstract
There are features that distinguish most early Christian manuscripts of literary texts from pagan high-quality literary manuscripts of the time, e.g., the Christian preference for the codex (esp. for texts functioning as scripture), greater use of punctuation and spacing to mark off sense-units, wider spacing between lines, these and other features apparently intended to facilitate the reading of these Christian texts. Taking a cue from an article by William Johnson in which he proposed that the more severe appearance of pagan literary manuscripts reflects the elite social circles in which they were read, I propose that the features of early Christian manuscripts also reflect the social characteristics of the Christian circles in which they were read. In sum, I propose that earliest Christian manuscripts are artifacts reflecting the more diverse social makeup of early Christian circles and the aim of enfranchising a wider spectrum of readers.

I
In this essay, I take a cue from a programmatic and path-breaking study by William A. Johnson, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, in which he cogently argued that previous attempts to portray reading in the Roman era were too generalized, and that

The more proper goal . . . is to understand the particular reading cultures that obtained in antiquity, rather than to try to answer decontextualized questions that assume in ‘reading’ a clarity and simplicity it manifestly does not have.²

In the concluding lines of his study, Johnson urges that ‘we urgently need . . . to frame our discussions of reading, whether ancient or modern, within highly specific sociocultural contexts’.³

³ Ibid., 625. Evidently, for Johnson, elite social circles considered collectively comprised a ‘highly specific’ reading context. So, I trust that it will be equally appropriate to treat early Christian circles broadly as well as another specific reading context.
Johnson chose to focus on ‘the reading of Greek literary prose texts by the educated elite during the early empire (first and second centuries A.D.)’, freely acknowledging, however, that it was one of a number of specific ‘reading cultures’ of the time.\(^4\) In the much more modest and exploratory study that follows, I focus on the particular ‘reading culture’ comprised of Christians in the first three centuries. I shall argue that there is a distinguishable Christian reading-culture, another ‘specific sociocultural context’, and that early Christian manuscripts are direct artefacts of it. The comparison is appropriate, for early Christians were particularly given to the reading of certain `literary texts (especially those that functioned for them as scriptures) in their gatherings, as we know from a variety of Christian references of the time (e.g., Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13). Indeed, as Harry Gamble showed in his magisterial study of early Christian books and readers, the production, copying, circulation and reading of texts was a remarkably prominent part of early Christian activities.\(^5\)

Perhaps the most intriguing contribution of Johnson’s essay was his argument that the typical format of high-quality Greek prose-text manuscripts was intended to reflect and validate the elite nature of the reading groups in which they were to be read. Taking his analysis of this matter as sound, I wish to consider here the formatting of earliest Christian literary-text manuscripts with a view to considering how they, too, likely reflect the nature of the circles in which they were to be read. We shall see that there are striking differences in format between the manuscripts that Johnson considered and those addressed here. I shall argue that these differences were deliberate, and that the format-features of earliest Christian manuscripts reflect and affirm the very different socio-cultural character of the Christian circles of the time. Before we turn to the Christian manuscripts and their features, however, it will be helpful to take further notice of Johnson’s analysis of pagan prose literary manuscripts and what they tell us about the ancient readers for whom they were intended.

It is well known that high-quality Greek prose-text manuscripts of the Roman era were formatted in what seems to us (and rightly so) to have made huge demands on readers. The most obvious feature, ‘scriptio continua’, required readers to form

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\(^4\) Ibid., 606.

words in an uninterrupted flow of Greek alphabetic characters, with no word-division or sense-unit demarcation, and typically no punctuation. This format is especially noteworthy, given that copies of ancient school exercises often have word-division, and ‘elaborate visual structural markers’ appear often in documentary texts and inscriptions. Moreover, Hebrew manuscripts of the time, such as the Qumran texts, have word-separation and spaces to indicate sense-units. Indeed, in copies of Roman literary texts prior to the period under consideration here, ‘word separation is the norm, in fact universal so far as we know’.6 This latter datum makes it all the more interesting that in the centuries we are concerned with here the Romans departed from word-separation and adopted scriptio continua. As Johnson observed, this is ‘a choice they would hardly have made if it interfered fundamentally with the Roman reading system’.7 So, assuming that Romans were not stupid, the deliberate move to this rather demanding format must have served something in the ancient reading culture. In short, prose literary texts were not formatted in scriptio continua because the ancients were incapable of thinking of a less demanding way of presenting texts for reading. Instead, Johnson cogently contends, this format was intended to reflect and serve the specific elite cultural settings in which the texts were to be read.

This will become still clearer if we take further note of the visual features of these manuscripts.8 They were typically not codices but handwritten rolls, held horizontally between the hands, the texts written in vertical columns ranging from 4.5 to 7.0 centimetres width, about 15-25 letters per line, left and right justification, and about 15-25 in height, with about 1.5-2.5 centimetres spacing between columns. The letters were carefully written, calligraphic in better quality manuscripts, but with no spacing between words, little or no punctuation, and no demarcation of larger sense-units. The strict right-hand justification was achieved by ‘wrapping’ lines (to use a computer term), ending each line either with a given word or a syllable, and continuing with the next word or syllable on the next line, the column ‘organized as a tight phalanx of clear, distinct letters, each marching one after the other to form an

7 Johnson, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading’, 609.
impression of continuous flow, the letters forming a solid, narrow rectangle of written
text, alternating with narrower bands of white space.' As Johnson observed,

The product seems, to the modern eye, something almost more akin to an
art object than a book; and, with its lack of word spaces and punctuation,
the ancient bookroll is, to the modern perception, spectacularly, even
bewilderingly, impractical and inefficient as a reading tool. But that the
ancient reading and writing systems interacted without strain is
indisputable: so stable was this idea of the literary book, that with only
small variations it prevailed for at least seven hundred years in the Greek
tradition. The economical hypothesis is that the reading culture was
likewise stable, and that readers were so thoroughly comfortable with the
peculiarities of the writing system that adjustments . . . proved
unnecessary over a great deal of time.10

Johnson probed further the visual qualities of literary bookrolls, pointing to ‘the
beauty of the letter shapes, and the elegant precision of placement for the columns’,
which reflect ‘[t]he elaborate care taken by scribes in the production of a literary
prose text’, achieving ‘an elegant harmony that speaks loudly to aesthetic
sensibilities’. In his words,

That the physical literary roll not only contained high culture, but was
itself an expression of high culture, does not need to be argued at length.
The product itself makes it fairly obvious.11

Johnson then shows that in the cultured circles in which such manuscripts were used,
‘the use of literary texts . . . is deeply rooted in that sense of refined aesthetic
enjoyment so formative in the interior construction of a cultural elite’. He makes an
interesting comparison with the way that opera functions in contemporary elite
culture, ‘the very difficulty serv[ing] to validate the activity as one exclusive to the
educated and cultured’.12

Having noted that the reading of such prose texts was a favored feature of
social gatherings of the cultural elite, he emphasizes that in these settings ‘it was the
reader’s job [emphasis his] to bring the text alive, to insert the prosodic features and

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9 Johnson, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading’, 609.
10 Ibid., 609-10. As Johnson shows, this means that modern proposals that texts were not read out but
were memorized and declaimed orally are very much dubious.
11 Ibid., 612.
12 Ibid., 615.
illocutionary force lacking in the writing system’. He goes on to observe that ‘[t]he reader played the role of performer, in effect, and the sort of direction for pause and tone given by the author’s para-linguistic markup in our texts (commas, quotes, italics, indentation, etc.) was left to the reader’s interpretation of the lines.’ In short, ‘A surprising amount of the burden to interpret the text was shifted from author to reader’. The ability to rise to this challenge is part of what marked off very skilled readers from others.

It will be important for what follows also to take account of Johnson’s observations that in the ancient Roman setting reading is ‘tightly bound up in the construction of the community’, and that ‘[r]eading of literary prose, often difficult and inaccessible to the less educated, is part of that which fences off the elite group from the rest of society’.

II
Taking Johnson’s study as the basis, in what follows I offer a complimentary (but much more modest) pilot-study of the reading of literary texts in worship gatherings of Christian circles of the first three centuries. As in Johnson’s study, I wish to draw particular attention to the visual features of earliest Christian manuscripts as reflective of the social character of the early Christian circles that used them, and perhaps also as indicative of a deliberate effort to format Christian texts in a manner that contrasts with the sort of elite-oriented copies that were the Johnson’s focus.

The Social Setting of Early Christian Reading

As noted already, we know from various sources that the reading of certain texts formed a frequent part of the worship gatherings of Christian believers. I trust that it will be sufficient to provide some limited illustration of this, especially given the impressive treatment of the matter by Gamble. In addition to the references to the reading of texts in Christian worship gatherings already cited, note also Paul’s demand that his letter to the Thessalonian church be read ‘to all the brothers’ (1 Thess. 5:27), and Justin’s description of Christian assemblies in the mid-second century, in which he states that ‘the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the

13 Phrasing cited in this paragraph all from ibid., 620. Johnson notes (n. 39) the extant manuscripts that have punctuation and other readers’ aids added by their users, evidence of the preparatory work that readers did to deliver the text appropriately.
14 Ibid., 623.
15 See, e.g., Gamble, Books and Readers in the Early Church, 205-31.
prophets are read for as long as time permits’, followed by an address by ‘the president’ (I Apol. 1.67). Indeed, Edwin Judge showed that the place of preaching/teaching in Christian gatherings (activity often connected to the reading of sacred texts) led to some pagan observers likening these more to philosophical circles than religious ones.\(^{16}\)

We also know something of the social character of Christian circles of the first few centuries, although certainly not as much as we could wish. Starting with evidence of first-century churches, it seems that they typically involved a diversity of people: free(d) and slaves, males and females, older and younger people, and a variety of socio-economic levels from workers to small/medium property owners and owners of businesses and, occasionally, individuals of some wealth and modest social status.\(^{17}\) As Meeks observed in his study of Pauline churches, ‘The extreme top and bottom of the Greco-Roman social scale are missing from the picture’, with ‘no landed aristocrats, no senators, equites, nor (unless Erastus might qualify) decurions’. Likewise, ‘There may well have been members of the Pauline communities who lived at the subsistence level, but we hear nothing of them’. Social strata in between the extremes are, however, ‘well represented’, including slaves. But in the Pauline letters, ‘The “typical” Christian . . . the one who most often signals his presence in the letters by one or another small clue, is a free artisan or small trader’. Overall, however, there was ‘a mixture of social levels in each congregation’, reflecting ‘a fair cross-section of urban society’.\(^{18}\)

Across the second and third centuries, there appears to have been an increasing, but still small, number of higher-status converts. In Justin Martyr we even have a Christian seeking to be taken seriously as a philosopher (but we cannot be confident whether he succeeded in this aim beyond Christian circles).\(^{19}\) Granted, by

\(^{18}\) The phrasing cited all from Meeks, The First Urban Christians, 73.  
\(^{19}\) See the multi-author volume from the recent conference on Justin held in the University of Edinburgh: Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, eds., Justin Martyr and His Worlds (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
the third century CE, Christian converts included some from upper echelons of Roman society. Nevertheless, the overall picture of the social makeup of Christian groups does not radically change from the first century urban groups reflected in Paul’s letters. This is broadly in line with Lampe’s detailed analysis of evidence for Christians in Rome in the first few centuries. Trebilco’s study of early Christianity in Ephesus does not deal explicitly with social strata, but he does include a discussion of references to material possessions in the Christian texts that may reflect Ephesian Christianity, noting indications of some moderately wealthy believers among larger bodies of Christians generally of more modest means. As far as levels of education and abilities in reading/writing in particular, we have indications of some Christians with what looks like a ‘grammar school’ education, but it is hard to find anyone from the elite cultural levels, such as Celsus, the second-century critic of Christianity (who progressed on through the highest level of the three levels of classical education).

The main point, however, is that typical Christian circles of the first three centuries were socially mixed, with most adherents from lower social strata, a minority from middle levels, and a very few from upper levels. To be sure, studies by Judge, Malherbe and others have forged a majority-view different from early twentieth-century pictures of early Christianity as a movement wholly made up of the dispossessed. We should recognize that earliest Christian circles comprised typically a variety of social levels, and that people with some property and level of education, from the first, seem often to have exercised particularly influential roles. But this very mixture of social levels immediately distinguishes Christian groups from the more homogenous elite circles that formed the focus of Johnson’s study. That is, the diversity of social levels typical of early Christian circles is what gives them a specific, perhaps distinctive, sociocultural identity. Judge remarked that early

21 Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 404-45, and esp. his conclusion to this chapter, 443-45.
Christianity ‘broke through social barriers and encompassed people of every level of community life in a way that had never been the case with any movement of ideas of an organized kind’.  

*Early Christian Manuscripts*

With this very brief and general sketch of the typical social settings comprised in early Christian gatherings, let us now turn to the visual features typical of earliest Christian manuscripts for what they tell us about the readers and settings for which they were copied. In what follows, I shall argue that earliest Christian manuscripts present us with a striking contrast to the sort of artefacts to which Johnson drew attention. I propose that the format typical of early Christian manuscripts suggest that they were prepared for a certain spectrum of mainly non-elite reader-competence.

The first and most obvious feature to note about early Christian manuscripts is that the great majority of them are codices, reflecting a curious preference by early Christians for the codex over the bookroll for their literary texts. This preference is comparatively well known among scholars, but I am not confident that the full pattern of data has been engaged in some attempts to account for this preference. More specifically, the extant manuscript evidence suggests that early Christians generally preferred the codex for their literary texts, but especially for those literary texts that they most highly prized, those that functioned as scripture. Christians were somewhat more ready to use the bookroll for other texts, such as theological treatises, liturgical

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25 In the following discussion, I draw heavily on my fuller discussion of all these matters in L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). In other publications as well I have drawn attention to the physical and visual features discussed here, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, ‘Early Christian Manuscripts as Artifacts’, in *Jewish and Christian Scripture As Artifact and Canon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Daniel Zacharias (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 66-80.

26 In a recent stimulating essay, Scott D. Charlesworth discusses the physical/visual features of early Christian Gospels manuscripts with a view to determining whether a given copy was intended for liturgical/public or private reading: ‘Public and Private–Second- and Third-century Gospel Manuscripts’, in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 148-75. His essay is rich in details and references, and his question and basic approach seem to me cogent. In particular, I agree that manuscripts with readers’ aids provided by the original copyist likely were intended for ease of public/liturgical reading. But I question his claim that the various readers’ aids he discusses are more common in second-century Gospel manuscripts than in third-century copies (148). Likewise, I hesitate over his insistence that the Christian copyist-conventions such as *nomina sacra* must indicate ‘controlled settings’ and early Christian copying centres (e.g., 149, 171-74). There may well have been some such settings, but the spread of these Christian copyist conventions do not seem to me to require these settings or necessarily reflect them.
texts, and other texts that may have functioned more for personal edification or study, although even in these genres the codex dominated.

It may be helpful to give some figures, which are derived from a recent consultation of the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB).\textsuperscript{27} Of 41 Christian manuscripts dated to the second century in the LDAB catalogue, 24\% are rolls, 76\% codices; and of about 190 third-century CE Christian manuscripts 23\% are rolls, and 77\% codices. Moreover, although Christian items make up about 2\% of the total of second-century manuscripts, about 27\% of the total of second-century codices are identifiably Christian books. Christian items make up about 12\% of the total of third-century manuscripts, but 38\% of third-century codices.\textsuperscript{28} Across the first four centuries, over 70\% of all codices are Christian manuscripts.

Although the general preference for the codex among early Christians is clear and striking, I contend that it is even more interesting that use of the codex is nearly total for copies of the texts that came to form the Christian canon. Among about 75 copies of OT texts dated to the second and third centuries CE, probably no more than 7\% of those that we may confidently take as Christian manuscripts are rolls. So far as NT writings are concerned, we do not have a single extant copy written on an unused roll (excluding, thus, the few examples of re-used rolls, ‘opisthographs’, such as P22). By contrast, of 58 second/third-century copies of extra-canonical Christian texts, some 34\% are bookrolls. So, as noted already, there appears to have been a somewhat greater Christian readiness to retain the bookroll for these sorts of texts.

In light of the overwhelming general preference for the bookroll in the period considered here, especially for copies of literary texts, the Christian preference for the codex book-form suggests some further observations. The first of these is that this preference for the codex must have been conscious and deliberate. Early Christians cannot have been unconscious that their preferred book-form was out of step with the larger book culture of the time. Indeed, the evidence suggests a particularly deliberate effort to move away from the bookroll for copies of texts that were intended to

\textsuperscript{27} The LDAB is a valuable online database which as of the date of writing this essay (March 2010) has over 15,000 manuscripts logged: \url{http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/}

\textsuperscript{28} Roger Bagnall has recently questioned the second-century dating of some Christian manuscripts, contending that many/most should be dated a bit later, to the third century CE: Early Christian Books in Egypt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). This would make little difference to my points here. Bagnall’s discussion of the Christian preference for the codex seems to me beset with some problems, as I note in my review of his book in Review of Biblical Literature: \url{http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/7289_7933.pdf}
function in their assemblies as scripture, as part of their ritual culture, as texts that were associated closely with their gathered worship settings.

This is all the more likely when we recognize what was involved. Preparation of a codex required skills and judgements distinguishable from and additional to those required of copyists on bookrolls. For the latter, the basic steps were to acquire a sufficient length of writing material (sold in shops by length and quality), and then copy the text in neat columns. But using a codex requires, e.g., the ability to estimate how many sheets will be needed, decisions about how to construct the codex (e.g., one gathering or multiple gatherings, and if the latter the number of sheets in each gathering), and use of a different layout (wider lines). So, the choice of whether to use a bookroll or a codex was certainly not a casual one. I suggest that it was unlikely also that professional copyists of literary texts, who would have been given to the use of the bookroll, were ready to use the one or the other book-form with equanimity.

A small constellation of other formatting features strengthens the suspicion that we are dealing with evidence of a specific reading-culture very different, even deliberately different, from the elite circles to which Johnson pointed.\(^{29}\) The space available in this essay requires me to present here only a brief overview of these matters.\(^{30}\) Let us begin with noting the nature of the copyists’ hands typical in Christian manuscripts. The hands are usually clear, competent and readable, but not calligraphic in visual appearance.\(^{31}\) The letters often include rounded forms and are less regular in size, but are carefully written separately and without ligatures. In a number of cases, the lettering is somewhat larger than characteristic of literary bookrolls, and the spacing between lines somewhat greater, resulting in fewer lines


\(^{30}\) I summarize briefly here manuscript features discussed more fully in Hurtado, The Earliest Christian Artifacts, 155-89.

\(^{31}\) Among NT manuscripts of this early period, the hand(s) of \textit{P4/P64/P67}, noticeably toward a calligraphic appearance, represents an exception (these three all possibly from the same codex). T. C. Skeat argued that these were remnants of a four-gospel codex: ‘The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels’, \textit{NTS} 43 (1997) 1-34, reprinted in J. K. Elliott (ed.), The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat (NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 158-92. But see the criticism of Skeat’s case by Peter M. Head, ‘Is \textit{P4}, \textit{P64} and \textit{P67} the Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels? A Response to T. C. Skeat’, \textit{NTS} 51 (2005) 450-557. Recently, Don Barker has proposed that \textit{P39}, \textit{0206}, \textit{0232}, and \textit{88} may all be early third-century or even late second-century manuscripts, all of which he also describes as “deluxe” editions with a calligraphic hand and careful bilinearity: “How Long and Old is the Codex of which P.Oxy. 1353 is a Leaf?” \textit{Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon}, eds. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 192-202.
per column than in high-quality pagan literary manuscripts with comparable column-heights. Even in comparison with contemporary pagan codices containing literary texts, Christian codices of equivalent size tend to have fewer lines per page and few letters per line, as noted by Eric Turner in his invaluable study of ancient codices.  

In addition, Christian codices, especially those containing scripture texts, exhibit punctuation marking sense-units and probably intended to signal where a reader should pause slightly (e.g., often a ‘middle-stop’, a dot placed vertically midway in a line). As examples, among earliest Christian manuscripts we find punctuation in P75 (Gospel of Luke and John), and P66 (Gospel of John), both manuscripts dated ca. 200 CE. These and other early Christian manuscripts also show the use of slightly enlarged spaces in lines to mark sense-units (roughly corresponding to our sentences), which would similarly signal where to make a pause in reading the text.

One also finds the use of a ‘diaeresis’, a set of two dots resembling the German *umlaut*, written above the initial vowel of a word that follows immediately another word ending in a vowel. This mark signals to the reader that the vowel above which it is written is not part of a diphthong but the first letter of a new word. In some cases, the diaeresis may also signal a vowel to be aspirated (i.e., a ‘rough-breathing’). We have an early examples of the diaeresis in P52 (the Rylands fragment of the Gospel of John), where it appears over the initial *iota* of ὑπερασπίζεται (recto, line 1, John 18:31) and also over the initial *iota* of ἔνα (recto, line 2, John 18:32; verso, line 2), another manuscript which takes us back at least to the late second century CE.  

I emphasize that these features are typically provided by the copyist, and not added by readers. In terms from the world of the automobile, they are not owner customizations but ‘factory equipment’. Collectively, they amount to a conspicuous

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32 Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), esp. 85-87. In Turner’s list of twenty-three codices from the second/third centuries with fifty or more lines per page (which he judged to be the upper end of the spectrum of lines per page), P. Chester Beatty IX-X (a copy of Daniel, Esther, et al.) is the only Christian codex (which has 45-57 lines per page).

effort to produce copies of texts with an emphasis on legibility, ease of reading, and even built-in guidance on how the text should be read. That is, the Christian manuscripts with these features reflect an effort to place somewhat less of a burden on the reader to decide how to deliver the text orally.\textsuperscript{34}

I submit further that this constitutes a very different purpose in comparison to the manuscripts studied by Johnson. In the Christian manuscripts, we have a greater concern for the content, the text itself, and what looks like comparatively less concern to produce a copy with strong aesthetic qualities. Unlike the manuscripts prepared for elite pagan circles, copies that are as much the product of high craftsmanship, almost \textit{objets d’art}, the Christian manuscripts to which I refer seem to have been prepared to serve fully and simply the texts that they contain, and those who will read them.

But it would be simplistic to conclude that early Christian manuscripts are merely utilitarian. If Johnson is correct that the format of the pagan literary rolls was intended to reflect and affirm the exclusivity of the elite social circles in which they were to be read, then Christian manuscripts (especially those that appear to have been prepared for public reading) typically seem to reflect a very different social setting, perhaps deliberately so. I propose that they reflect a concern to make the texts accessible to a wider range of reader-competence, with fewer demands made on readers to engage and deliver them. In turn, this probably reflects the more socially diverse and inclusive nature of typical early Christian groups. That is, I submit that these early Christian manuscripts are direct evidence and confirmation of the greater social breadth and diversity represented in early Christian circles, in comparison to the elite social circles in which pagan literary texts were more typically read.

Can we go farther and surmise that these manuscripts evidence a \textit{conscious turn away} from the elitist format of high-quality literary manuscripts? If so, then the formatting of earliest Christian literary codices would represent the artefacts of a deliberate effort to reflect, affirm, and facilitate a distinguishable Christian book/text culture, one characterized by social inclusiveness and diversity. If high-quality pagan bookrolls were intended to be daunting to anyone but the elite, these Christian manuscripts appear to be intended to enable a greater range of Christians to serve in the public reading of texts in Christian gatherings.

\textsuperscript{34} A similar proposal was offered by Turner, \textit{The Typology of the Early Codex}, 85-86.
Indeed, we could also say that the social effects of this (and perhaps one of the intentions) included ‘enfranchising’ a wider social diversity of people in Christian circles in the public reading and discussion of literary texts, activities that were otherwise dominantly associated with elite social strata. The prominent place of the public reading and discussion of literary texts (esp. scriptures) in churches meant that these experiences (which, again, were more associated with cultured elite social strata) were extended to a wider diversity of people, including many for whom these sorts of experiences would otherwise not be likely. That is, early Christian manuscripts are probably also artefacts of this very interesting further social consequence of the centrality of the reading of literary texts in Christian gatherings.

Also, there are noteworthy instances of what we may think of as Christian watermarks, or at least visual references to Christian faith. Indeed, I have referred to these as comprising the earliest extant evidence of an emerging ‘visual culture’ in ancient Christianity. I refer specifically to the ‘nomina sacra’, and the ‘staurogram’. I have discussed these phenomena rather fully elsewhere, and so here I shall simply present a summary of relevant matters.

The so-called ‘nomina sacra’ have been noted often, and in recent years have been the object of renewed interest. Although some scholars have proposed that they originated simply as readers-aids, intended to provide navigation points on the page, the majority view is that these curious abbreviations of key words in early Christian discourse were visual expressions of Christian piety. Moreover, they are distinctively Christian. Neither the specific words themselves (the earliest and most consistently treated are Θεος, Κυριος, Ιησους, and Χριστος) nor the forms in which they are written have a direct analogy or precedent beyond early Christian manuscripts. So widely is their distinctiveness recognized among experts in ancient manuscripts that the presence of any one of them on an otherwise unidentifiable
fragment is typically sufficient for a palaeographer to judge it likely part of some Christian manuscript.

Although there is a certain similarity in the reverential attitude behind the ways that the Tetragrammaton was treated in ancient Jewish manuscripts (e.g., written in a distinctive script, or replaced with a series of dots, or sometimes with ‘Elohim’), there are also crucial differences. Allowing for their variations, the nomina sacra are much more standardized. They are abbreviated forms of the words in question, with a horizontal stroke placed over the abbreviation. Moreover, it appears that the Jewish special treatment given to the Tetragrammaton was intended particularly to signal to readers not to pronounce YHWH but to use a reverential substitute, e.g., Adonay in Hebrew or Kyrios in Greek. But there is no indication that in the public reading of early Christian texts reverential substitutes were used for the words represented by the nomina sacra. Instead, it appears that the lector pronounced the words normally, the abbreviated forms making no difference. That is, the nomina sacra seem to have been purely a visual phenomenon, a written/visual expression of reverence for the referents of the words in question. Readers of Christian texts would encounter and have to deal with them, but auditors would not.

The so-called ‘staurogram’ is a device that likewise seems to have been deployed in early Christian manuscripts as an expression of Christian faith. The device involves the superimposing of the majuscule letter rho on the majuscule tau. The bare device itself can be traced in various non/pre-Christian utilitarian uses (e.g., as a symbol for ‘3’ or ‘30’), but it was adopted in some early Christian manuscripts and deployed in a uniquely Christian manner and with a distinctively Christian meaning. Specifically, the earliest Christian uses of the device are as part of the way that the words σταυρός (‘cross’) and σταυρόω (‘crucify’) are written in some early manuscripts containing NT texts. In these cases, the words are abbreviated, i.e., treated as nomina sacra (so with a horizontal line over the abbreviated form), the abbreviation including the first and final letter(s), and including also the tau and the

39 Granted, this is an argument from silence, as I am not aware of any reference to the way that Christian lectors handled the nomina sacra.
40 But given the high regard for scripture texts in many early Christian circles, is it wildly imaginative to suppose that ordinary believers, even illiterate ones, might have asked to view the copy of a sacred text, out of admiration and reverence?
rho of these words combined to form the ‘staurogram’ device. That the earliest extant Christian use of the device is in these manuscripts and solely as part of the words ‘cross’ and ‘crucify’ has led a number of scholars to judge that the Christian purpose was to allude visually to the crucified Jesus, the loop of the rho intended as a pictographic reference to the head of a crucified figure on a cross (represented by the tau). If this is correct (and I think it is), these instances of the ‘staurogram’ comprise our earliest visual references to the crucified Jesus, earlier by some 150 years than what are usually taken by historians of Christian art as the initial examples.

In any case, the nomina sacra and the staurogram represent efforts to mark early Christian manuscripts visually as Christian. These scribal devices were not utilitarian in purpose. The nomina sacra were not intended really as abbreviations in the ordinary sense of that word; they did not function to save space. Nor did they have some pedestrian function, such as orientation points for readers on a codex page. They originated and developed as visual expressions of Christian piety, especially in the case of the four earliest words so treated, which have been referred to more specifically as ‘nomina divina’. The earliest Christian use of the tau-rho device, the ‘staurogram’, is even more obviously a visual expression of Christian devotion. Earliest Christian manuscripts are not often calligraphic or luxurious, and as we have noted reflect an impressively conscious turn from the literary bookroll toward the codex, which in the general culture of the time was regarded as less elegant or appropriate for literary texts. But the nomina sacra and the staurogram in particular show a concern for imprinting a distinctive semiotic quality on early Christian manuscripts, identifying them specifically as Christian items.

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43 Two Christian gems dated to the fourth century CE and a fifth-century seal in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City are frequently cited as earliest visual depictions of the crucified Jesus. But cf. now Robin Margaret Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art (London: Routledge, 2000), 131-41, who has recognized the ‘staurogram’ as likely an earlier pictographic reference to the crucified figure of Jesus.

44 Contra Tuckett, ‘“Nomina Sacra”: Yes and No?’

Conclusion
Freely acknowledging the limited dimensions of the preceding essay, nevertheless, I hope to have shown that earliest Christian manuscripts hold a significance well beyond the technical interests of palaeographers and papyrologists, that these ancient items are artefacts of historically noteworthy social developments comprised by earliest Christian circles. In particular, I contend that these manuscripts reflect and promoted a specifically Christian reading-culture that in its historical setting was innovative and remarkable. It comprised a social phenomenon very different from the elite reading culture studied by Johnson, and involved the enfranchising and affirmation of a diversity of social strata in the public reading and discussion of literary texts, specifically texts that formed the charter documents of their religious life.