

The Early New Testament Papyri: A Survey of Their Significance

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I

There are now 127 NT papyri in the Gregory-Aland list, comprising actually 125 manuscripts, which represents a massive increase accrued over the course of the 20th century.¹ Before 1900, only a handful of NT papyri were known, none of them early enough to have any perceived value above the major textual witnesses of the fourth century. Indeed, NT papyri in significant numbers and of special antiquity appeared on the scene only well into the 20th century. So, e.g., in 1912, when Henry Sanders published the photographic facsimile of Codex Washingtonianus (the four Gospels), which he dated to the late 4th or early 5th century, this manuscript was then one of the very earliest witnesses to the text of any of the four Gospels, surpassed in date only by Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus.²

Moreover, the number of NT papyri available has continued to grow. For example, in a survey of NT papyri published in 1995, Eldon Epp reported the total

¹ As P64 and P67 are now commonly taken as portions of the same codex, and P33 and P58 likewise parts of another, however, there are actually 125 manuscripts represented. T.C. Skeat proposed that P4, P64 and P67 all were from the same codex: "The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels," *NTS* 43 (1997) 1-34, defending a suggestion made by others earlier, but cf. Peter Head, "Is P4, P64 and P67 the Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels? A Response to T. C. Skeat," *NTS* 51 (2005) 450-57. More recently, see Tommy Wasserman, "A Comparative Textual Analysis of P4 and P64+67," *TC* 15 (2010) 1-26. The most up to date and reliable list of NT papyri is provided online by the Münster Institut für textkritische Textforschung, based on the *Kurtzgefasste Liste* maintained there: <http://intf.uni-muenster.de/vmr/NTVMR/ListeHandschriften.php>. There is also an online list provided by Wieland Wilker: <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/texte/Papyri-list.html>. Another surprisingly up to date list appears in the Wikipedia entry, "List of New Testament Papyri": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_New_Testament_papyri. The most recent Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed., 8th printing, 2001) included 116 papyri in its list of witnesses, pp. 684-90. In addition, though not papyrus manuscripts, Gregory-Aland 0189 (a single vellum leaf containing Acts 5:3-21) dated ca. 200 CE, and 0220 (containing Rom. 4:23-5:3, 8-13) dated 3rd century are included.

² Henry A. Sanders, *Facsimile of the Washington Manuscript of the Four Gospels in the Freer Collection* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1912); *idem*, *New Testament Manuscripts in the Freer Collection, Part 1, the Washington Manuscript of the Four Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

number of NT papyri as 96, and in a later analysis published in 2007 noted 115 in the official list, the present total of 125 reached in 2008 thus comprising a 30% increase in thirteen years and nearly a 9% increase over the total in Epp's later essay.³ These copies of NT writings form part of a larger body of copies of early Christian literary texts, which include Christian copies of OT writings and various other Christian texts including writings now regarded as Christian apocrypha (e.g., Gospel of Thomas), other religious writings and treatises (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*, Ireneaus, Melito, and a number of unidentified texts), liturgical texts, homilies, and also exorcistic and magical texts. I focus here on the earliest NT manuscripts, drawing upon features of this larger body of early Christian manuscripts, and the studies of the still larger body of manuscripts of the period (Jewish and pagan).⁴

The primary value of the NT papyri is, of course, not their writing material but their age. Actually, however, a number of these NT papyri are in fact dated to the same centuries from which our well-known principal witnesses come, 4th to 8th century CE, and so, at least for text-critical purposes, have not been particularly crucial.⁵ But there are also a number of papyri (and a few parchment manuscripts as well) that are dated

³ Eldon Jay Epp, "The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3-21; *idem*, "Are Early New Testament Manuscripts Truly Abundant?" in *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. David B. Capes and et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 77-117.

⁴ I provide a list of all identifiably Christian copies of all literary texts (including OT, NT and extra-canonical ones) in L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), Appendix 1, pp. 209-29. The standard printed (and now increasingly dated) catalogues are Joseph van Haelst, *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juif et chrétiens* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976); Kurt Aland *Repertorium der griechischen christlichen Papyri, I: Biblische Papyri, Altes Testament, Neues Testament, Varia, Apokryphen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976); *id.*, *Repertorium der griechischen christliche Papyri, II: Kirchenväter-Papyri, Teil 1: Beschreibungen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995). Since 1997, Cornelia Römer has produced an annual review of publications on "Christian Papyri" in *Archiv f-ur Papyrusforschung*, taking up the work of the late Kurt Treu, who produced these annual reviews 1969-1991.

⁵ Some are comparatively quite late, e.g., P41 (Acts, 8th cent. CE), P42 (Luke, 7th/8th cent), P61 (Paulines, ca. 700 CE), P73 (Matthew, 7th cent), P74 (Acts, 7th cent).

considerably earlier and comprise our very earliest witnesses to NT writings, and these have a unique historical significance.⁶ In this presentation, therefore, I focus on the 49 NT papyri and two parchment manuscripts (0189, 0220) palaeographically dated to the 2nd or 3rd century CE, giving some key information about them, and highlighting the principal historical issues on which they uniquely shed light.⁷

The value of these manuscripts is also inverse to the amount of text that they typically preserve. Overwhelmingly, these early manuscripts, including most of the 51 earliest considered here, are small remnants of the manuscripts from which they derive. Indeed, in a disappointing number of cases we have only fragments of individual leaves of the codex in question, and in a few other instances we have portions of a handful of leaves of a codex. Of the 51 manuscripts that we consider in this discussion, only five provide us with much more than such small portions of text. Nevertheless, all of these 51 manuscripts comprise our earliest copies of NT writings and so are invaluable as

⁶ The early parchment manuscripts in question (with dates as given in the Münster online list) are these: 0162 (John 2:11-22, 3rd/4th century), 0171 (Matt. 10:17-23, 25-32; Luke 22:44-56, 61-64, ca. 300 CE), 0189 (Acts 5:3-21, 2nd/3rd century), and 0220 (Rom. 4:23—5:3, 8-13, 3rd century).

⁷ Again, taking P64 and P67 as portions of one codex, I have also chosen to omit from consideration here another 13 NT papyri (as well as 0162 and 0171), which are dated “3rd/4th” century, i.e., roughly 300 CE. The manuscripts included here will suffice to illustrate the matters discussed. For earlier discussion of NT papyri, see, e.g., Kurt Aland, “The Significance of the Papyri for Progress in New Testament Research,” in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. Philip Hyatt (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 334-37; Eldon Jay Epp, “The New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts in Historical Perspective,” in *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Maurya P. Horgan and Paul J. Kobelski (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 261-88; and *idem*, “The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman, Michael W. Holmes (SD 46; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3-21; Barbara Aland, “Der textkritische und textgeschichtliche Nutzen früher Papyri, demonstriert am Johannesevangelium,” in *Recent Developments in Textual Criticism: New Testament, Other Early Christian and Jewish Literature*, ed. Wim Weren and Dietrich-Alex Koch (Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2003), 19-38; *id.*, “Das Zeugnis der frühen Papyri für den Text der Evangelien: Diskutiert am Matthäusevangelium,” in *The Four Gospels 1992*, ed. F. Van Segbroeck, C.M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle, J. Verheyden (BETL 100; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 325-35. As well, in a number of articles Kurt Aland reviewed early NT papyri: “Neue neutestamentliche Papyri,” *NTS* 3 (1956-57) 261-86; “New neutestamentliche Papyri II,” *NTS* 9 (1962-63) 303-16; *NTS* 10 (1963-64) 62-79; *NTS* 11 (1964-65) 1-21; *NTS* 12 (1965-66) 193-210; “Neue neutestamentliche Papyri III,” *NTS* 20 (1973-74) 357-81; *NTS* 22 (1975-76) 375-96.

witnesses to the history of the text of these writings, and for a number of other historical questions as well that I will highlight here. Before we consider their importance with reference to these questions, however, a few further introductory comments are in order

Principal NT Papyri

Among NT papyri, those included in the Chester Beatty collection hold a major importance. Indeed, the publication of the Chester Beatty biblical papyri in 1933-1937, eleven codices (originally thought to be twelve) comprising very early copies of a number of OT, NT and extra-canonical texts, decisively presented scholars, especially in NT and LXX studies, with a veritable goldmine.⁸ Most of these codices are dated to the third century and at least one OT codex (Chester Beatty Papyrus VI, portions of Numbers and Deuteronomy) dated to the mid/late second century CE. Moreover, although there were fascinating fragments of early copies of NT texts previously unearthed from Oxyrhynchus (e.g., P1 [P.Oxy.2], a fragment of a 3rd-century codex of Matthew), the Chester Beatty biblical papyri provided much more substantial portions of remarkably early copies of several biblical texts.

For our purposes, three of the Chester Beatty codices are particularly important. P45 (Chester Beatty I) comprises 30 of the original 112 leaves of a codex, preserving portions of all four Gospels (in the “Western” order: Matthew, John, Luke, Mark) and Acts, and is dated to the early/mid 3rd century CE.⁹ In P46 (Chester Beatty II, dated ca.

⁸ Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts of Papyrus of the Greek Bible* (London: Emery Walker Ltd., 1933-37). The earlier view that there were twelve codices was later revised, and it is now accepted that we have remains of eleven.

⁹ See esp. T. C. Skeat, “A Codicological Analysis of the Chester Beatty Papyrus Codex of the Gospels and Acts (P45),” *Hermathena* 155 (1993) 27-43, republished in *The Collected Biblical Writings of T.C. Skeat*, ed. J.K. Elliott (NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 141-57. Among Greek manuscripts, the “Western” order of the Gospels is found in Codex Bezae (Codex D) and also Codex Washingtonianus (W).

200 CE), some 86 leaves of an original 102, a codex of Pauline epistles, we have substantial portions of Romans, Hebrews (!), 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. P47 (Chester Beatty III, 3rd century) comprises portions of some ten leaves of a codex containing Revelation.

The other comparably more substantially preserved NT manuscripts are part of the Bodmer papyri collection.¹⁰ Two papyri in particular are important for this discussion. P66 (Bodmer II) is dated ca. 200 CE and preserves much of the Gospel of John.¹¹ Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV, P75, which is typically dated to ca. 200 CE as well, preserves substantial portions of Luke and John (102 of an estimated 144 pages survive, along with further fragments, of which eleven were identified subsequent to the publication of the *editio princeps*).¹² (After being put on the market for sale in 2006, P75 was purchased and donated to the Vatican Library where it is now housed.)¹³

¹⁰ Twenty-two manuscripts discovered in 1952 near Dishna, Egypt, they were acquired by the Swiss Martin Bodmer. Publication of them began in 1954. See now James M. Robinson, *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri: From the First Monastery's Library in Upper Egypt to Geneva and Dublin* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). Developing further a suggestion by C. H. Roberts ("Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament," *Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970], 56), Robinson contends that the Bodmer and Chester Beatty papyri originated from the same Pachomian monastery library. His view is, thus far, still under debate.

¹¹ P66 preserves nearly all of John 1:1—14:26, except for pages 35-38 containing John 6:11-35, and less well 14:29—21:9. Victor Martin and J. W. B. Barns, eds., *Papyrus Bodmer II, Supplement, Nouvelle édition augmentée et corrigée* (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1962). Subsequently, an additional bi-folium containing part of John 19 was published as P.Köln inv. 4274/4298: Michael Gronewald, "Johannesevangelium Kap. 19.8-11; 13-15; 18-20; 23-24," in *Kölner Papyri (P.Köln) 5*, ed. M. Gronewald, Klaus Maresh, Wolfgang Schäfer (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1985), 73-76 (+ plate 7). Apart from this bi-folium and an additional folio (pp. 139-40, John 19:25-28, 31-32) in the Chester Beatty Library, P66 is kept in the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana in Cologne-Geneve. I omit here P72 (Bodmer Papyrus VII/VIII), the earliest copy of 1-2 Peter and Jude, as it is dated "3rd/4th" century. It now is held in the Vatican Library.

¹² Victor Martin, Rudolf Kasser, *Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV* (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1961); Kurt Aland, "Neue neutestamentliche Papyri III," *NTS* 22 (1975-76) 375-96. See James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (NTTSD, 36; Leiden: Brill; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 615 (n. 1) for references to various proposals for the date of P75, which vary from ca. 175 to ca. 275 CE.

¹³ For a news-story on the acquisition of P75 by the Vatican Library, see http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2007/03/05/gospel_arc.html.

The Other Earliest Witnesses

As mentioned already, the remaining earliest NT papyri and the two parchment manuscripts are all fragmentary, often portions from only one page of a codex. But a few of these are dated even earlier than the Chester Beatty and the Bodmer papyri noted here. Though preserving only small portions of text, therefore, they are of great importance. Among these, the Rylands fragment of John, P52, will be most widely known, which has often been dated ca. 150 CE, but now may have to be placed a bit later toward the end of the second century.¹⁴ A few other papyri as well are dated by their editors to the late 2nd century: P90 (John 18:36-40; 19:1-7), P104 (Matt. 21:34-37, 43, 45), and P98 (Rev. 1:13-20). Several more are dated just a bit later than these: P32 (ca. 200, Titus 1:11-15; 2:3-8), P64/P67 (ca. 200 CE, portions of the same codex, Matt. 3:9, 15; 5:20-22, 25-28; 26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31-33), and P77 (Matt. 23:30-39), P103 (Matt. 13:55-56; 14:3-5), and 0189 (Acts 5:3-21) are dated late 2nd and/or early 3rd century. The remaining 36 NT papyri considered here, along with 0220 (a parchment manuscript), are dated to sometime in the third century.¹⁵

Amount of NT Text

As noted already, the fragmentary nature of most of the earliest NT manuscripts means that collectively they preserve only limited amounts of the text of NT writings.

¹⁴ See now Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *HTR* 98 (2005) 23-48, who argues that the time-frame for P52 "must include dates in the later second and early third centuries" (46). P52 was dated by comparison with P.Egerton 2 (a fragment of an unknown gospel text), the date of which has also now been moved later. See also L. W. Hurtado, "P52 (P. Rylands Gk. 457) and the Nomina Sacra: Method and Probability," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003): 1-14.

¹⁵ The remaining 36 papyri not already mentioned are these: P1 (Matt), P4 (Luke), P5 (John), P9 (1 John), P12 (Heb), P15 (1 Cor), P20 (James), P22 (John), P23 (James), P27 (Rom), P28 (John), P29 (Acts), P30 (1-2 Thess), P39 (John), P40 (Rom), P48 (Acts), P49 (Eph), P53 (Matt/Acts), P65 (1 Thess), P69 (Luke), P70 (Matt), P80 (John), P87 (Philemon), P91 (Acts), P95 (John), P101 (Matt), P106 (John), P107 (John), P108 (John), P111 (Luke), P113 (Rom), P114 (Heb), P118 (Rom), P119 (John), P121 (John).

The amounts vary considerably, however. For example, the 17 earliest copies of John together preserve 823 of the 867 verses, about 95% of John.¹⁶ By contrast, the nine copies of Matthew from the same period comprise 139 of the 1070 verses, or about 13%, the one copy of Mark (P45) preserves 157 of 666 verses, about 23.5%, and the single copy of Philemon (P87) preserves five of the 25 verses, 20% of that text.¹⁷

Nevertheless, obviously we can only be grateful that we have these early remnants, however limited they are. Collectively, the 51 manuscripts dated to the 2nd or 3rd centuries give us copies of 20 of the 27 NT writings. Moreover, arguably, the very random nature of what portions of text that they preserve actually enhances their value as witnesses to the NT writings. In effect, they provide us samples of the text of the writings in question, on the basis of which we can make wider (but cautious) inferences about the nature of the text as a whole in the respective manuscripts from which the fragments derive.¹⁸

Provenance

It is also well known that the earliest NT manuscripts all were found in Egypt, and so it is appropriate to consider how representative they may be of the wider circulation of NT writings in the period of these manuscripts. There are, however, several reasons for

¹⁶ The verses of John in these 16 papyri are 1:1-51; 2:1-25; 3:1-36; 4:1-54; 5:1-47; 6:1-71; 7:1-52; 8:12-59; 9:1-41; 10:1-42; 11:1-57; 12:1-50; 13:1-38; 14:1-31; 15:1-27; 16:1-4, 6-7, 10-33; 17:1-26; 18:1-40; 19:1-42; 20:1-20, 22-31; 21:1-9, 18-20, 23-25. The total of 867 verses that comprise John involves omitting 8:1-11, a pericope that does not appear in any of the earliest manuscripts of John.

¹⁷ The verses extant collectively in the nine manuscripts of Matthew are 1:1-9, 12, 14-20; 2:13-16, 22-23; 3:1, 9, 10-12, 16—4:3; 5:20-22, 25-28; 11:26-27; 12:4-5; 13:55-56; 14:3-5; 20:24-32; 21:13-19, 34-37, 43-45; 24:3-6, 12-15; 23:30-39; 25:41-46; 26:1-40.

¹⁸ This is essentially also the view advocated by Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (trans. E. F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1987), 58. See also Barbara Aland, "Kriterien zur Beurteilung kleinerer Papyrusfragmente des Neuen Testaments," in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. A. Denaux (BETL 161; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 1-13.

thinking that these early manuscripts are likely reflective of the status and transmission of NT writings more widely.¹⁹

First, these earliest manuscripts reflect a spectrum of transmission practices and policies, from a rather strict/careful reproduction to a somewhat freer handling of the text, and with varying degrees of copyist skill as well. I submit that this variety of copying practices and textual complexions works against any “local text” theory, which would require a more homogenous body of manuscripts in a given geographical locality.

Second, there is what Eldon Epp has called “a brisk ‘intellectual commerce’ and dynamic interchanges of people, literature, books, and letters between Egypt and the vast Mediterranean region.”²⁰ That is, we have evidence of an impressive frequency of contacts between Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean basin. For example, Epp has shown how commonly and frequently letters were sent and received across considerable distances and with impressive speed of delivery.²¹

Additionally, as I noted in a previous discussion, the diversity of Christian literary texts found in Oxyrhynchus further confirms a vigorous “networking” trans-locally.²² For example, we have portions of three copies of *Shepherd of Hermas* (composed in Rome), a copy of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* (composed in Gaul), and several copies of works by Melito of Sardis, all these dated to the late 2nd and/or early 3rd century. So, if

¹⁹ I echo here the position taken by Eldon J. Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 90.

²⁰ Eldon Jay Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 35-56, citing 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 26-27.

we find this sort of evidence in a provincial centre such as Oxyrhynchus (ca. 200 km south of Cairo), it is fairly certain that in major cities such as Alexandria this exchange and circulation of texts would have been even greater. To use a medical analogy, if my blood circulatory system is healthy, a physician can take a blood sample from any part of my body, even my toe, and be confident that the sample will be reliably indicative. In sum, it is safe to agree with Epp's judgement that it is likely that the Egyptian papyri "represent an extensive if not the full textual spectrum of earliest Christianity."²³

II

I turn now to survey briefly the significance of these earliest NT manuscripts for NT textual criticism. In simplest terms, their great contribution is that they take us back a hundred or more years earlier than the fourth-century evidence on which all NT textual criticism had rested prior to their availability. As already noted, all of the 51 manuscripts that form the focus here are dated to the 3rd century or earlier, at least eight of them to ca. 200 or soon thereafter, and as many as four (P52, P90, P98, P104) to the (late) second century. Even if we accept Roger Bagnall's recent argument for moving the dates of these 2nd-century witnesses somewhat later (and I see no compelling reason for doing so), we have now a body of evidence that gives us a direct view of the transmission of the NT

²³ Epp, "The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament," 9. Note also that Guglielmo Cavallo and Herwig Maehler (eds.), *Hellenistic Bookhands* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 16-17, show that the kind of scripts used in copies of classical literary texts "developed along very similar lines" in Egypt and Italy, suggesting a "koine" of Greek literary scripts in the Mediterranean world. This is consistent with (and provides a larger context for) the indications of a trans-local sharing of Christian texts and copying conventions.

writings in the third century, and that perhaps even allows us to peer farther back into the second century.²⁴

Some of the effects of this body of evidence from these early manuscripts have been evident for some time now. I illustrate this first with reference to key individual papyri. For example, as shown several decades ago, the striking agreement of P75 with the text of Codex B in Luke and John refuted earlier proposals that Codex B was the result of a third-century or fourth-century recension of an earlier and “rougher” kind of NT text.²⁵ It appears instead that the so-called “Neutral/Alexandrian” text-type represents and derives from a rather careful and competent transmission that goes back at least into the late second century and perhaps earlier still.²⁶ This is of potentially profound significance for any theory and history of earliest text of NT writings (a matter to which I return later).

To cite another example, although Lietzmann flatly stated soon after the publication of the Chester Beatty papyri that P45 and P46 had no great significance for knowledge of the transmission of the NT text, it is now clear that he was flatly wrong.²⁷ In his magisterial study, *The Text of the Epistles*, Günther Zuntz showed the crucial importance of P46 as a basis for understanding the early transmission of the Pauline

²⁴ Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), esp. chapter 1. He makes some valid points, but unfortunately appears to take the publications of Carsten Thiede as representative of the approach to dating NT papyri followed by NT scholars more broadly. Cf. my review in *Review of Biblical Literature*: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/7289_7933.pdf.

²⁵ Gordon D. Fee, “P75, P66, and Origen: The Myth of Early Textual Recension in Alexandria,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 19-45, republished in Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 247-73.

²⁶ Royse’s analysis of P75 confirms these judgements (*Scribal Habits*, 615-704, esp. 615-18).

²⁷ Hans Lietzmann, “Zur Würdigung des Chester-Beatty Papyrus der Paulusbriefe,” SPAW.PH 25 (1934), 775, republished in his collected essays, *Kleine Schriften, vol. 2: Studien zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Kurt Aland (TU 68; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 171; *idem*, “Die Chester-Beatty-Papyri des Neuen Testament,” *Antike* 11 (1935), 147, = *Kleine Schriften*, 2.168, as cited by Epp, “The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament,” 12.

epistles.²⁸ Likewise, although soon after its publication P45 was enlisted as a supporting member of the so-called “Caesarean text” in Mark, subsequent analysis has disproved this, and both in its textual character and physical/visual qualities P45 continues to offer fascinating evidence that requires adjustment of previous views about the early transmission of the Gospels and Acts.²⁹ Studies by Colwell and Royse show that P45 has an unusually large number of “significant singular” readings that likely represent a particular effort to produce a readable and edifying text, “improving” it by many stylistic changes, harmonizations, simplifications, and even pruning.³⁰ This likely explains why P45 does not agree closely with any of the key witnesses to known text types, and it also shows the kind of editorial freedom exercised by some copyists and readers, which contrasts with the copying stance exhibited in P75. So, P45 and P75 show that in the earliest period from which there is evidence there was a certain variety in copying practice and aims, including both a more strict, and perhaps varying degrees of a comparatively freer, practice. It is interesting to me that the great palaeographer Eric Turner identified two broad tendencies in ancient papyri of classical literary texts, one exhibiting greater freedom in adding lines or leaving out lines and with “substantial variant phrases or formulas” (which Turner associates with a Platonic attitude toward

²⁸ Günther Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (Schweich Lectures 1946; London: British Academy, 1953).

²⁹ See now L. W. Hurtado, “P45 and the Textual History of the Gospel of Mark,” in *The Earliest Gospels, The Origins and Transmission of the Earliest Christian Gospels. The Contribution of the Chester Beatty Gospel Codex P45*, ed. Charles Horton (JSNTSup 30; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 132-48. As I showed earlier, P45 and Codex W have a significant level of agreement in Mark, but neither of them has any such significant agreement with the putative key Caesarean witnesses (Θ and 565): Larry W. Hurtado, *Text-Critical Methodology and the Pre-Caesarean Text: Codex W in the Gospel of Mark* (SD 43; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

³⁰ Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, 103-97, esp. 123 and the summary on 197; E. C. Colwell, “Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits: A Study of P45, P66, P75,” in Colwell, *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 106-24, esp. 117.

books), and the other reflecting a greater respect for the wording of the text and exhibiting a lower “coefficient of error” (which Turner links with Aristotle).³¹ It may well be that earliest NT manuscripts show a somewhat comparable spectrum of transmission practice.

The Bodmer papyrus of John, P66, has also had a significant impact. Though initially judged simply a “mixed” text, i.e., not a “pure” witness to any of the major text-types, P66 is now typically linked with the P75-B type of text (albeit, a somewhat looser member of this type, with a number of readings supported also by “Western” and “Byzantine” witnesses).³² As Royse has stated, however, “The most striking feature of P66 is the quantity of corrections,” identifying 465 corrections in the extant 75 leaves.³³ This unusually large body of corrections has received a good deal of scholarly attention, most recently and extensively by Royse.³⁴ They reveal much about the copyist, including his many initial failures in copying accurately and his subsequent efforts to make things right. In P66, as perhaps in no other early manuscript, we have a fascinating glimpse into one copyist’s efforts to produce an accurate copy of his exemplar, and also additional evidence of early variant readings to be considered in establishing the text of John.

In addition to the significance of particular key papyri, collectively these early manuscripts comprise a valuable body of data for NT textual criticism.³⁵ Of course, as noted already, their early date makes them especially important in assessing variants, and

³¹ Eric G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 1980), 106-9.

³² Fee, P75, P66, and Origen,” 30-31; *idem*, *Papyrus Bodmer II (P66): Its Textual Relationships and Scribal Characteristics* (SD 34; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1968), 35.

³³ Royse, *Scribal Habits*, 409.

³⁴ See Royse’s detailed classification and discussion of the corrections in *Scribal Habits*, 409-70. Among earlier studies, Fee, *Papyrus Bodmer II (P66)*, is particularly important.

³⁵ Epp, “The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament,” 13-18, sets out a number of matters for which the early manuscripts are crucial.

also for seeing how copyists did their work. Moreover, recent studies of these manuscripts have required modifications of some traditional principles of textual criticism. For example, James Royse's massive study of all the earliest substantially preserved NT papyri shows persuasively that copyists in fact more often produced shorter, not longer, readings, and so the traditional principle of preferring the shorter reading does not carry the force it once did. Likewise, Royse has shown that harmonization to the immediate context was common, a datum that has obvious implications for assessing variants on the basis of similarity to the wording/style of the text.³⁶

But these manuscripts are also crucial for the larger (and as yet not adequately addressed) task of constructing a theory and history of the earliest stages of textual transmission of the NT writings. Eldon Epp has complained about what he regards as a surprising under-utilization of the early papyri and also has attempted to develop a picture of earliest transmission of the NT from these manuscripts.³⁷ Of course, since the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland NT all published papyri have been cited in the textual apparatus. Also, beginning in 1986, the appearance of successive volumes of *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus* is another indication of scholarly interest, as is the IGNTP volume on the papyri of John.³⁸ But in the interests of time, I restrict myself to a brief

³⁶ Royse, *Scribal Habits*, e.g., 704-36 (a whole chapter on "The Shorter Reading" criterion), and his concluding remarks, 737-42.

³⁷ See esp. Eldon J. Epp, "The New Testament Manuscripts in Historical Perspective," in *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Maurya P. Horgan and Paul J. Kobelski (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 261-88; *idem.*, "The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century," 71-103.

³⁸ *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus*, ed. W. Grunewald et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986--). W. J. Elliott and David C. Parker, *The Gospel According to St. John: Part 1, The Papyri* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

consideration of Epp's effort to characterize the earliest period of NT textual transmission on the basis of the early papyri.

Essentially, Epp attempts to use early NT papyri to construct a diachronic map of the textual transmission of the NT by assessing how particular papyri line up with the major witnesses of later centuries that have been the basis of the well-known text-types.³⁹ He notes the strong P75-B connection (with P66 as a somewhat weaker member of this "textual cluster") as showing a textual "trajectory" of this kind of text back to ca. 200 (the common dating of P75), and Epp accepts the arguments for tracing this trajectory earlier still, well back into the second century at least. He also posits a looser but real connection of certain other papyri (P29, P48, P38, 0171) to the kind of text later found in Codex D (at least in Acts). Finally, noting that P45 does not seem to fit readily with either of these kinds of texts, and also noting the similarities of P45 and Codex W in Mark, he proposes a third trajectory in which these are key witnesses. On the basis of this analysis, Epp concludes that "the claim that at least three distinct 'text-types' existed in the dynamic Christianity of the second century can be made with considerable confidence."⁴⁰

This is not the occasion for a full assessment of Epp's proposals, but I will allow myself one critical observation. It is valid to consider whether these early witnesses reflect the text-types associated with later key manuscripts, and so whether these text-types can be traced back into the very period of the earliest papyri. But I think that we should also try to analyze the early papyri *among themselves and in comparison with one*

³⁹ Epp, "The Significance of the Papyri," 100, gives fuller lists of NT papyri for each of his proposed "textual clusters". I cite here the early, major papyri for each one.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

another. Indeed, rather than (or at least in addition to) characterizing the early papyri on the basis of their relationships to later witnesses, I propose that it would be more heuristically useful simply to characterize the respective “textual complexions” of the earliest manuscripts more inductively, in terms of the kinds of readings that each manuscript supports.⁴¹ This latter analysis might give us a better basis for judging what kinds of tendencies and attitudes shaped the textual handling of the NT writings in the earliest period. From this, in turn, we might be able to develop a theory and history of the very earliest textual transmission of these writings.⁴²

One further observation about the effects of early NT papyri: Essentially, the variants in them are those we already knew from later witnesses (most often in later Greek witnesses, sometimes only in the Latin or Coptic version). Indeed, we do not find in the early papyri the larger variants that reflect a major change in the text, e.g., the pericope of the adulterous woman, the long ending of Mark, or the major additions in the Codex Bezae text of Acts.⁴³ I highlight two net effects of these data. First, they confirm the earlier view that the great majority of textual variants emerged very early, likely in

⁴¹ I also have some reservations about Barbara Aland’s characterization of early papyri by how well their readings accord with the “*Ausgangstext*” (i.e., the Nestle-Aland text). This produces some interesting observations, but, again, seems to me to import an external standard into the assessment: Cf. B. Aland, “Der textkritische und textgeschichtliche Nutzen früher Papyri”; *id.*, “Das Zeugnis der frühen Papyri für den Text der Evangelien: Diskutiert am Matthäusevangelium.” Kyoung Shik Min, *Die früheste Überlieferung des Matthäusevangeliums (bis zum 3./4. Jh.)*. Edition und Untersuchung (ANTF 34; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006), is a full application of her approach to the early papyri of Matthew.

⁴² Michael Holmes proposed that Zuntz’s classic study focused on P46 provides an instructive model for developing a more soundly based theory of the early NT text: “*The Text of the Epistles Sixty Years After: An Assessment of Günther Zuntz’s Contribution to Text-Critical Methodology and History*,” in *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies*, ed. J. W. Childers and D. C. Parker (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 89-113. In the same volume, I survey major factors that shaped the early transmission of the NT: “The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon,” 3-27. I include a brief discussion of recently published papyri (6-14), proposing that the early manuscripts exhibit a variety of copying practices and purposes.

⁴³ The earliest witness with the pericope of the adulterous woman (placed at John 7:53—8:11) is Codex Bezae (5th century). The earliest Greek witnesses with Mark 16:9-20 are Codex A & D (5th century). There are indications in patristic writers that both passages were known earlier, but these are the earliest copies of NT writings to include them.

the second century. But, second, it appears that the earliest state of the text of NT writings was *no more diverse* than what we have in later witnesses (the versions and the major Greek codices of the 4-6th centuries), and perhaps even that significant textual variation continued *well beyond* the earliest period. So, it is now dubious to cling to the simplistic notion sometimes asserted in the past that the second century was a period of “wild” textual variation, far greater than what we see in the 4th century and thereafter.⁴⁴ I reiterate the observation that the early papyri certainly attest varying levels of fluidity in the NT text, and a readiness among some Christians to “improve” the text in various ways (e.g., stylistic changes, harmonizations, etc.); but these manuscripts do not reflect a careless or “wild” transmission attitude and process.⁴⁵

III

In addition to their great importance in NT textual criticism, these early NT manuscripts cast invaluable light on other important historical issues as well. These include various questions about the circulation of particular texts and the role and usage of texts more generally in early Christianity. For example, it is interesting to note the comparative number of copies of various NT writings in the extant earliest manuscripts.⁴⁶ In 17 of these 51 manuscripts we have copies of John, exactly one-third of the total, and considerably more than the next most frequently found text, Matthew (9 copies).

⁴⁴ As Epp observed, the early papyri “are not conspicuous for furnishing a mass of new, meaningful variant readings,” but instead typically attest variants already known from later manuscripts: Epp, “Are Early New Testament Manuscripts Truly Abundant?” 106.

⁴⁵ For further discussion of these issues and for references to other scholarly literature, see Hurtado, “The New Testament in the Second Century,” esp. 6-19.

⁴⁶ I discuss the comparative number of all texts found in early Christian manuscripts (intra-canonical and extra-canonical) in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 16-24. In that discussion I include manuscripts dated “3rd/4th” century, and so the figures are slightly different. But the broad results are the same.

Thereafter come Acts and Romans (6 copies each), Luke (5), 1 Thessalonians and Hebrews (3 each), 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, James, Philemon and Revelation (2 each), and one copy of each of the remaining texts (Mark, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, and 1 John). It is also interesting to note that the most frequently found non-canonical text is *Shepherd of Hermas* (9 copies among manuscripts of this same period). If the comparative number of surviving copies can be taken as indicative of the comparative number of copies circulating in these early centuries, it is clear and very interesting which texts were favored.

These earliest manuscripts also confirm that the ancient Christian preference for the codex book-form, especially, it appears, for those texts that Christians treated as scripture, goes right back earlier than all of our extant evidence, into the second century and possibly earlier.⁴⁷ This has to be seen in the context of an overwhelming preference for the roll in the larger literary and cultural environment of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. About 5% of all 2nd-century copies of literary texts (pagan, Jewish and Christian) are codices, and about 21% of all 3rd-century copies. By contrast, about 75% of all Christian manuscripts (i.e., of all literary texts, canonical and extra-canonical) dated to the 2nd century, and about 67% of those dated to the 3rd century are codices.

Moreover, if we confine ourselves to copies of texts that Christians treated as scriptures, the preference for the codex is exhibited even more strongly, and almost total. It is illustrative of this preference that we do not have a single example of any NT text copied on an unused roll. We have a few cases of NT texts copied on *re-used* rolls (an

⁴⁷ For further discussion, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43-93, which I draw upon here.

“opisthograph”), but otherwise all early NT manuscripts are codices.⁴⁸ There are a few OT texts on rolls that may be Christian copies, but well over 90% of Christian copies of OT texts are codices. By contrast, about one third of copies of extra-canonical Christian texts (e.g., apocryphal texts, theological treatises, etc.) are on rolls.⁴⁹ In light of the general view of the time that the roll was the more appropriate form for a valued copy of a literary text, the early Christians’ preference for the codex, and especially for their most highly valued texts, can only represent a deliberate counter-cultural choice.⁵⁰

Texts copied on re-used rolls, opisthographs, were made for personal reading/study, and so the examples of such copies of Christian texts among our earliest papyri, which include some NT texts (John, Hebrews, Revelation) and also extra-canonical texts (e.g., *Hermas*, *Gospel of Thomas*), can be taken as artifacts of Christians wanting such personal copies.

It is likely, however, that most of the earliest NT manuscripts were copied for reading in churches. A variety of features that distinguish these manuscripts from high-quality copies of classical texts seem intended to facilitate this, such as the generous-sized lettering and spacing between the lines, and the use of spaces and elementary

⁴⁸ P12 is a citation of Heb. 1:1 in a letter on the recto of a roll, with portions of Genesis on the verso, incorrectly included by Epp among the continuous-text copies of NT texts (“The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament,” 5). P13 (portions of Hebrews), P18 (Revelation), and P22 (John) are all opisthographs, the NT texts copied on the outer side of a roll, the inner side containing another text (for which the roll was originally prepared).

⁴⁹ E.g., two of the nine earliest copies of *Hermas* are rolls (P.Oxy. 4706 and P.Berl. 5513), as are both early fragments of Irenaeus (P.Oxy. 405 and P.Jena inv. 18+21), the Dura Gospel harmony fragment (P.Dura 10), one of the copies of *Gospel of Thomas* (P.Oxy 655), and the one copy of *Gospel of Mary* (P.Oxy 3525).

⁵⁰ Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, proposes that Christians adopted the codex from Roman use of it, but he admits that the Christian preference for the codex, and especially for scripture texts, is remarkable and an innovation. On the wider preference for, and the characteristics of, literary bookroll, see esp. William A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

punctuation to signal sense-units.⁵¹ These and other features seem to be what we may call “readers’ aids” that may have been particularly helpful to those with less than elite schooling (where one would be equipped to handle the more severe format of high-quality classical manuscripts). In another essay I have noted the contrast between the format of earliest Christian manuscripts and contemporary manuscripts of classical texts prepared for elite social circles, proposing that the typical layout of Christian copies of scriptural texts evidences the more socially diverse nature of early Christian readers.⁵²

Another distinguishing feature of Christian manuscripts, including our earliest papyri, is the practice of writing certain words in a distinctive fashion, the so-called *nomina sacra*.⁵³ The Greek words in question, among which θεος, κυριος, Ιησους, and Χριστος are the most consistently treated in this manner, are written in an abbreviated form (typically first and final letters, e.g., θς, κς, Ις or Ιη, Χς) with a distinctive horizontal stroke placed over the abbreviation. The presence of the *nomina sacra* in our earliest NT papyri confirms that this scribal practice is so early that it pre-dates all our extant manuscripts, i.e., early second century at the latest, requiring the revision of earlier views that the practice originated perhaps in the third century. Instead, the preference for the

⁵¹ I provide further discussion of a number of these features of earliest Christian manuscripts in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 155-89. Scot Charlesworth, “Public and Private — Second- and Third-Century Gospel Manuscripts,” in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, eds. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (LSTS 70; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 148-75, proposes a classification of earliest gospel manuscripts as intended either for public/liturgical or private reading. Some examples are more difficult to classify, but he correctly observes that we have manuscripts indicative of both reader-settings.

⁵² L. W. Hurtado, “Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading,” in *The Early Text of the New Testament*, eds. Charles E. Hill, Michael J. Kruger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2011). Cf. William A. Johnson, “Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity”, *AJP* 121 (2000) 593-627, who discusses the formatting of manuscripts of classical texts prepared for reading in elite social circles; and now see *idem*, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵³ I give a fuller discussion in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 95-134. I must acknowledge, however, the erroneous statements on p. 129 about the treatment of the name *Iesous* in P46. Contrary to my statements there, in P46 the name is abbreviated in all the references cited. I am unable to account for this embarrassing error.

codex and the *nomina sacra* reflect an astonishingly early emergence of an identifiably Christian book-practice, or, as I have elsewhere described it, an early Christian “material and visual culture.”⁵⁴

A few scholars have contended that the *nomina sacra* and perhaps also the preference for the codex derive from Jewish scribal practices (esp. Kurt Treu and Robert Kraft), but this is very much a minority position.⁵⁵ It remains the case that in the body of pre-Christian manuscripts (esp. from Judaea) there is no instance of a literary text on a codex and no instance of any of the *nomina sacra*.⁵⁶ It is, however, entirely plausible to posit some kind of similarity of reverential attitude or motive behind the practice of the *nomina sacra* and the Jewish scribal treatment of *YHWH* in ancient biblical manuscripts (e.g., a series of dots in place of the name, or writing YHWH in archaic Hebrew characters, or writing it in Hebrew characters in Greek copies of OT texts). Likewise, the presence of the “readers’ aids” mentioned earlier in Christian copies of biblical texts may very well reflect Jewish scribal practices.⁵⁷ But the specific scribal device of the *nomina sacra* seems to be a Christian innovation.

Conclusion

⁵⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, “The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the *Nomina Sacra* and the Staurogram,” in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 271-88.

⁵⁵ Kurt Treu, “Die Bedeutung des Griechischen für die Juden im römischen Reich,” *Kairos* NF 15, Hft. 1/2 (1973) 123-144; Robert A. Kraft, “The ‘Textual Mechanics’ of Early Jewish LXX/OG Papyri and Fragments,” in *The Bible As Book: The Transmission of the Greek Text*, ed. Scot McKendrick and Orlaith A. O’Sullivan (London: British Library, 2003), 51-72.

⁵⁶ Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (STDJ 54; Leiden: Brill, 2004) is now the major resource for these manuscripts.

⁵⁷ Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches*, 131-236, discusses writing practices in the early Judean manuscripts.

Within the limits of this presentation I have been able to address only briefly some of the major ways in which the earliest NT manuscripts provide valuable resources for NT scholars. I have also tried to illustrate the usefulness of approaching these manuscripts from the perspective of study of the larger body of Christian and non-Christian manuscripts of the same period. Most directly, of course, these particular NT manuscripts are central to the questions at the heart of NT textual criticism. Already, as I have indicated, these precious early copies of NT texts have re-shaped (and will continue to re-shape) our views of the earliest stages of the textual transmission of the NT writings, involving the abandonment of confidently-held positions. These manuscripts also open up further lines of investigation and analysis that involve questions wider than traditional NT textual criticism. It is too much to ask NT scholars to become papyrologists, but it is not too much to ask that NT scholars develop an awareness of the importance and relevance of the early NT manuscripts for the investigation of Christian origins.