

What Do Earliest Christian Manuscripts Tell Us About Their Readers?

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Introduction

My purpose in the following presentation is to focus on the physical and visual features of earliest Christian manuscripts to consider what we can learn from them about those who prepared and read them. The manuscripts I will speak to are among the earliest artifacts of Christianity. Indeed, the oldest of these manuscripts are probably the earliest Christian artifacts extant, some of them dated to the late second century CE, a few perhaps a bit earlier. So, for any historical interests in the transmission of the writings concerned, and for other historical questions as well, these manuscripts are unexcelled in importance. They are, however, often overlooked by scholars beyond the circles of papyrologists and textual critics. So I hope to show that they cast light on several important matters of broader import that will be relevant to anyone interested in early Christianity.

But you may be thinking that there is a prior question lurking here that needs to be addressed: How, in fact, do we identify ancient manuscripts as Christian items in the first place? So, let us turn to this question immediately. In answering it we will also derive some observations directly relevant to the main question stated in my title.

How Do We Recognize Early Christian Manuscripts?

There are essentially two main types of evidence that can be used to identify a manuscript as “Christian”, by which I mean a manuscript that was used (and probably produced) by Christians. The first and most obvious indication that some manuscripts are Christian ones is their contents. In this early time, we can safely conclude that a copy of a text that is itself expressly Christian in origin was used by Christians. So, for example, copies of the writings that came to form the NT, other known Christian texts such as *Shepherd of Hermas*, and identifiably Christian theological tractates and homilies would all readily be classified as of Christian provenance. Of course, Christians also copied and used other texts as well which were not composed by Christians, prominent among which were the OT writings. Deciding whether a given copy of one of these texts is of Christian provenance requires other indicators that I will turn to shortly.

Indeed, one of the observations we can make on the basis of earliest Christian manuscripts (as well as references in early Christian writings themselves) is that already in the earliest centuries (and probably earliest decades) Christians were heavily involved in writing, copying, reading, exchanging, and disseminating a great number of texts.¹ In recent decades there has been a good deal of justifiable interest in ancient “orality”, the spoken word, and oral “performance” as features of early Christianity in its ancient Roman-era setting. But, without denying for a moment that oral speech was important in that period, I must emphasize the prominent place of texts as a distinguishing feature of earliest Christianity. Indeed, in the Roman religious environment, early Christianity seems to have been unexcelled, and perhaps unique, in the scale of the production, use, and distribution of texts, devoting impressive personnel and financial resources to the activities involved.

It is interesting to take a moment to note the range of texts attested in the extant Christian manuscripts of the first three centuries CE.² We have remnants of copies of many texts, including most of those that comprise the Greek OT (which includes the writings regarded as “Apocrypha” by Judaism and Protestants).³ Indeed, for a number of OT texts we have remnants of multiple copies. There are copies of all NT writings except for 1-2 Timothy, and 3 John. In addition, there are remnants of well over twenty other literary texts, plus a number of others such as prayers, magical texts, and exorcistic texts.

When we note that virtually all of our extant manuscript evidence of these earliest centuries comes from Egypt (indeed well into Egypt, in places such as Oxyrhynchus), the range of writings attested is impressive.⁴ To be sure, we cannot know how many of the writings attested in the manuscript remains were read by any one Christian or group of Christians. But, as most of our evidence comes from

¹ For discussion, see esp. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). To get an idea of the number of Christian texts produced in the early centuries (many of them now lost or extant only in fragments or as quotations in other texts) see Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History* (trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, 2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005).

² In what follows I draw upon my fuller discussion in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 16-41. See also Appendix 1 (209-27) for a table of manuscripts with identifying data.

³ The following OT texts are not attested: 1 Chronicles, 1-2 Kings, Song of Solomon, Nehemiah, 1-2 Samuel, Lamentations, 1 Maccabees, Judith.

⁴ Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007) is a fascinating description of Oxyrhynchus based on the large trove of manuscripts found there, among which the Christian manuscripts are a small portion.

Oxyrhynchus, we can say that Christians there seem collectively to have had an interest in, and to have made use of, an impressive list of writings, and this can suggest things about what kind of Christians they probably were. For example, it appears that these were believers who regarded the OT as scriptures (and so were not Marcionites, and probably not so-called “Gnostics”).

The manuscripts also reflect a noteworthy range of geographical derivation of texts. In this material from a provincial town well over a hundred miles up the Nile from Alexandria, we have copies of writings of Irenaeus (from Lyons), Melito (Sardis), and also multiple copies of *Shepherd of Hermas* (Rome). Moreover, these copies are all dated palaeographically close to the time of their composition. So, these manuscript remains attest a vibrant and energetic networking of Christians all around the Mediterranean basin that involved the production, distribution, and exchange of texts. That is, these fragmentary manuscript remains reflect a desire by their early Christian readers to develop a certain trans-local outlook on their faith. They may have lived in a provincial town, but they seem not to have been provincial in the scope of their reading tastes and religious interests.

But we can make a further inference as well. Prominent among the writings from afar are those connected with early Christian figures and locations that reflected what we may call “proto-orthodox” Christianity, the various circles of Christians that came to comprise the mainstream. We have copies of works by Irenaeus of Lyons, the doughty exponent of the four-fold Gospel and opponent of various Christian sects, Melito of Sardis, the eloquent advocate of a recognizably traditional Christian faith, and Hermas of Rome, the author of the somewhat puzzling text that was, nevertheless, intended and received widely for its advocacy of Christian holiness. These are all key representatives of the emergent “catholic/orthodox” Christian faith in the first few centuries. We would be entitled to suppose, therefore, that the Christians who read these texts in Oxyrhynchus were believers who tended in this faith-direction.

To be sure, we also have copies of other texts, some of which seem to reflect a more sectarian, or perhaps elitist, or esoteric outlook. These include *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Mary*, and several other so-called “apocryphal” Christian writings. So, collectively, the Egyptian Christians whose manuscript remains we have from this period may have included either a diversity of faith-stances or simply some Christians with eclectic interests and tastes. I must note, however, that from these manuscript remains it is hard to posit separate groups such as “Thomas” Christians, or

“Mary” Christians. There may well have been such groups, but my point is that the mere existence of these texts does not in itself require the inference that they reflect discrete groups or versions of Christianity.⁵ In any case, the copies of these “apocryphal” Christian writings further demonstrate the place of composing, copying and reading texts in earliest Christianity, and also the rich diversity of the texts involved.

To judge from the extant number of copies, however, some texts seem to have been more popular, or at least more frequently copied, than others. Psalms leads the way with 18 extant copies from these earliest centuries, followed by the Gospel of John (16 copies), Gospel of Matthew (12 copies), then *Shepherd of Hermas* (11 copies), Genesis (8 copies), Luke and Acts (7 copies each), Isaiah (6 copies), Revelation (5 copies), Romans and Hebrews (4 copies each), and then an extended list of other texts with fewer copies numbering from three down to one each. Broadly speaking, the greater number of copies of some texts, for example, Psalms, John, Matthew and Isaiah, is reflected also in the greater number of citations and allusions to them in early Christian writings, confirming the view that these texts were read more frequently than those with fewer extant copies.

You may well ask about copies of other texts that were not written by Christians, and were not used exclusively by them. The OT writings are the most obvious examples. How would one decide whether a copy of one of these texts was of Jewish or Christian origin, for they were scriptures to both faith traditions?⁶ In these cases especially, we must take account of another type of evidence, in particular certain physical and visual features that are commonly accepted among scholars familiar with these ancient manuscripts as indicative that they derive from Christian circles.

The Codex

⁵ For some cogent cautionary discussion about inferring groups from texts, see Frederik Wisse, “The Use of Early Christian Literature as Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 177-90.

⁶ Scholars rightly debate the degree to which “Judaism” and “Christianity” were fully distinguishable as early as the second century CE. Nevertheless, I think that it is correct to speak of two faith communities in this period, although there were likely individuals and perhaps circles of Christian believers who also considered themselves Jews (and may have been considered so by the larger Jewish community). Cf., e.g., Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002); Thomas A. Robinson, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009)

One of the distinguishing features of early Christianity was a strong preference for the codex book-form for literary texts, over the roll (scroll) which was the overwhelmingly preferred book-form in the larger culture of the time.⁷ The codex was essentially a leaf-book, the ancestor of the book-form with which we are familiar, constructed of sheets of writing material folded to form leaves, the folded sheets bound at the folded edge [slide 2]. By contrast, the roll (“scroll”) was constructed by joining sheets of writing material to form a continuous length of this material. In a codex, the text was written on both sides of the leaves, whereas with a roll the text was written in narrow columns on what would be the inner side of the rolled-up writing material [slide 3].

As we will note shortly, the differences between Christian and non-Christian preferences in this matter are stark and undeniable. Moreover, it is noteworthy that early Christians seem to have preferred the codex book-form especially for those literary texts that they regarded most highly and used as scripture. Indeed, for these texts, the codex seems to have been used almost exclusively and from the earliest years from which we have any evidence. By contrast, all our evidence of identifiably Jewish manuscripts indicates an equally strong preference for the roll, especially for their copies of scriptures [slide 4]. So well known is the Christian preference for the codex that if papyrologists come across a portion of an identifiable OT text, even a single large fragment, and if this fragment can be identified as a leaf (or part of a leaf) from a codex (which can be judged if the same text continues from one side of the fragment onto the other), they typically judge the fragment to be a portion of a Christian manuscript.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that the codex was not a Christian invention. We have references to the use of the small parchment codex for portable copies of (pagan) literary texts in the late first-century CE Roman writer, Martial (*Epigrams* 1.2; 14.184, 188, 190, 192), and we have examples among extant manuscripts.⁸ The codex (parchment and papyrus) was used more commonly, however, for non-literary material, such as astrological tables, and simpler forms of the codex served for purposes such as note-taking, shopping lists and “things to do”. It was, essentially, viewed as a utilitarian form of book, and generally not appropriate

⁷ For a fuller discussion, see my chapter in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43-93.

⁸ A list of parchment codices containing pagan literary texts is given by Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 39.

for literary texts, at least in the early centuries with which we are concerned here.[slides 5-6]

We get a good idea of the strong general preference for the roll in this period by comparing the percentage of extant manuscripts that are rolls and codices. A recent check on the Leuven Database of Ancient Books is revealing [slides 7-8]. Of items dated to the second century CE, the LDAB lists 1848 rolls compared with 113 codices. For the third century CE, the LDAB lists 420 codices, and 1184 rolls. Put another way, codices make up about 6% of the total of second-century items catalogued, and about 26% of the total of third-century items. By the fourth century CE, however, codices make up the majority of manuscripts. It is an obvious question why we see this shift across these centuries, but we cannot take time here to engage it. Instead, I want to show how starkly different the data are for identifiably Christian manuscripts.

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.⁹ Although Christian items make up a very small percentage of the total of manuscripts from these centuries, it is still clear that the Christian preference for the codex went against dominant preferences in the book-culture of the time [slide 9]. For example, 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.

But the differences are starker still if we confine ourselves to copies of texts that functioned in these centuries as scriptures. I made a more detailed analysis of copies of Christian literary texts a few years ago, and the data will not have shifted enough since then to change the results significantly. Essentially, Christians massively preferred the codex for scriptures, but were a bit more ready to use the roll for other texts, though even here the codex was favored. In a list of 58 Christian copies of non-biblical texts dated to the second or third centuries, about 34% are rolls. These are copies of theological tractates (such as Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*) and a number of other texts, including copies of several “apocryphal” writings. But when

⁹ Consultation of LDAB on 22 February 2010. I omit from my count items classified as “fragment” (which means that the editor was unable or unwilling to identify whether it came from a codex or roll) or “sheet” (which means a portion of writing material that derived from neither a roll nor a codex).

we consider copies of OT writings or those writings that came to comprise the NT, the preference for the codex is nearly total. Among about 75 copies of OT texts dated to the second and third centuries CE, probably no more than 7% of those that may be Christian manuscripts are rolls. So far as NT writings are concerned, we do not have a single extant copy written on an unused roll.¹⁰

The clear impression is that early Christians thought the codex particularly appropriate for their most prized writings, those that functioned in their churches as scriptures. Indeed, I suggest that we can infer that any copy of a Christian text written on a roll was probably not intended to function as scripture, at least in the sense of being read as part of corporate worship, but was likely used in personal reading and/or study. In short, the book-forms in which texts were copied likely give us artifactual evidence of early Christian attitudes about these texts (or at least about these particular copies). The preference for the codex is certainly a feature relevant to the formation of the Christian canon of scriptures.

Scholars have offered various ideas about why Christians so strongly preferred the codex, and as yet there is probably not a clearly dominant position on the matter. I will return to this question a bit later, after we have dealt with some another interesting feature that helps us to identify Christian manuscripts.

The Nomina Sacra

Another earmark that identifies a manuscript even more confidently as of Christian provenance is the curious scribal practice known among scholars as the *nomina sacra* (“sacred words”) [slide 10].¹¹ The term “*nomina sacra*” designates a collection of words central in early Christian religious discourse which were typically written in a distinctive manner. They were abbreviated (usually first and last letters, often with one or more middle letters for longer words), and with a distinctive horizontal stroke placed over the abbreviation [slide 11]. The words earliest and most consistently treated in this manner are the Greek words *Theos*, *Kyrios*, *Christos*, and *Iēsous* (respectively, “God”, “Lord”, “Christ”, and “Jesus”); and other words came to be included in the practice as time went on across the first several centuries [slide 12]. These abbreviated forms are so distinctive that, even if all we have is a fragment and

¹⁰ There are a very few copies of NT texts on re-used rolls, e.g., P22, but these do not indicate any preference between book-forms.

¹¹ I give a much fuller discussion and engagement with other scholars in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 95-134.

we cannot identify the text it contains, the appearance of *nomina sacra* is sufficient to lead papyrologists to judge that the fragment must be from a Christian manuscript.

Several factors make the *nomina sacra* remarkable. First, although abbreviations of various frequently used words are common in copies of “documentary” texts (such as contracts, deeds, land-registers, etc), abbreviations are rarer in copies of literary texts. But in Christian literary texts (especially copies of OT and NT writings), these particular abbreviations are frequent, indeed probably more frequent and consistent than in Christian documentary texts.

Second, abbreviations typically functioned to save space on a small/limited writing surface. The most common abbreviations were on coins and inscriptions, where the many titles of a ruler would need to be accommodated.¹² But the *nomina sacra* have nothing to do with saving space. The manuscripts in which they are found typically have wide margins, generous-sized writing, ample spacing between lines, and in every way suggest that the copyist was unconcerned about the available space on the writing material.

Third, even the specific, typical forms of the *nomina sacra* set them apart. The usual way that one made an abbreviation in ancient Greek or Latin was to write the first letter or first few letters of a word. This is called abbreviation by “suspension”. With one particularly interesting exception, which I cannot take time to discuss here, the *nomina sacra* are typically what are called “contractions”, the first and final letters (and one or more medial letters in some longer words).¹³

Finally, perhaps the most puzzling feature of the *nomina sacra* is the horizontal stroke placed over the abbreviated forms. This is not a typical feature of other abbreviations, in Christian or non-Christian evidence. Sometimes a similar stroke is placed over the end of an abbreviated word, a suspended form, especially if it occurs at the end of a line, to signal to readers that some letters of the word have been omitted. But the stroke that forms part of the *nomina sacra* is placed right over the abbreviated form, and irrespective of where the *nomina sacra* forms occur in lines of text.

¹² E.g., imperial titles were frequently abbreviated on coins and inscriptions: PP (Pater Patriae), Cos (Consul), F (Filio), Divi (Divine), Aug (Augustus), etc.

¹³ In some early instances, Jesus’ name (Ihsouj) is abbreviated by “suspension”, as IH. I have proposed that the numerical value of IH (18) may have been a factor prompting this abbreviation (reflecting ancient Jewish interest in “gematria”), and that IH may have been the first of the *nomina sacra*. Larry W. Hurtado, “The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 655-73.

So, to summarize, these are the principal factors that are used to identify earliest Christian manuscripts. When we can recognize the contents of a manuscript as Christian texts, then we can be rather confident that the manuscript comes from Christian hands. In addition, there are two physical earmarks that reflect early Christian copying practices and that can be taken as indicating a highly likely Christian provenance of a manuscript: the codex book-form (especially in texts used as scripture), and the *nomina sacra*.

Early Christian Manuscripts in Historical Perspective

The next obvious questions that present themselves are *why* Christians preferred the codex and deployed the *nomina sacra*, and what these features represent in historical perspective. In addition, I want to present some other features of Christian manuscripts that will further help us to learn something about those who prepared and used them.

Let us begin by taking up again the early Christian preference for the codex book-form.¹⁴ Some scholars have proposed that the codex was preferred because Christians saw in this book-form some practical advantage over the roll. For instance, some have suggested that the codex may have been more convenient for itinerant preachers, or because readers could supposedly more easily find a particular passage by leafing through the pages of a codex. Another proposal is that Christians preferred the codex because they were largely people from lower social strata in which the codex (which was more typically used for non-literary purposes) was a more familiar book-form than the roll. So, in this view, the predominance of the codex in early Christian circles was a reflection of their socio-economic makeup.

Other scholars, however, contend that in the historical context the strong preference for the codex must have been intended to distinguish Christian book-practice. Regardless of whether one was or was not a frequent user of literary texts, in that setting one would certainly know that the roll was deemed the appropriate book-form for literary texts, and that the codex was regarded as more appropriate for “sub-literary” purposes (e.g., manuals, tables of data, etc.). I tend to find this view more persuasive. I think that it is particularly relevant to remember that early Christians seem to have preferred the codex especially for their scriptural texts, and were a bit more ready to use the roll for their other literary texts. I submit that this suggests that

¹⁴ I quickly mention proposals discussed more fully in Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43-89.

the preference for the codex likely represents a deliberate choice against the dominant cultural preference for the roll. That is, Christians may have appropriated the codex as their preferred book-form as an expression of their emerging sense of being distinctive. More specifically, they may have preferred the codex to distinguish physically their copies of scriptural texts from Jewish copies and from pagan religious texts.

We should also note that the commitment to use of the codex for serious literary purposes required copyists to acquire and develop skills beyond those typically involved in copying on rolls. For a roll, all copyists needed was an adequate length of writing material and the abilities to copy in sequential columns. But use of a codex for any sizeable text required several further abilities, such as estimating how many sheets would be needed, deciding how to construct the codex (whether in a single “gathering” or multiples, and if the latter how many sheets per gathering), and writing on both surfaces of papyrus (or skin). It is evident that Christians in the second and third centuries were at the leading edge of developing the codex for literary purposes. So they had to invest some serious thought and effort into the use of this book-form. In short, they did not adopt the codex because it was already serviceable for their needs; instead, they *adapted and developed* the codex book-form to make it serviceable for their needs, specifically the need to accommodate large texts and then collections of texts in one manuscript.

As for the *nomina sacra*, here too we are dealing with a notable feature of early Christian books that requires some explanation. Although there has been the occasional proposal that the *nomina sacra* may have served some practical purpose, such as helping readers orient themselves on a page, most scholars have concluded that these curious abbreviations originated as expressions of early Christian piety.¹⁵ That is, these words seem to have been written in this distinctive manner to set them off visually from the surrounding text out of reverence for the referents of the words so treated. This fits with the observation that the four words for “God,” “Lord,” “Jesus,” and “Christ” are the words most earliest and most consistently treated as *nomina sacra*.

Those familiar with ancient Jewish manuscripts will note some rough similarity to the Jewish scribal tendency to mark off the divine name (*YHWH*) in

¹⁵ For further discussion of the issues, see esp. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 120-33.

copies of scriptural texts. In Hebrew OT manuscripts, this was often done by writing *YHWH* in archaic Hebrew characters, or by writing a series of dots where the name belonged, and sometimes by substituting *Elohim* (“God”) for the divine name. In Greek OT manuscripts, the name was often written in Hebrew characters. Jewish scribal practices concerning the divine name varied, and do not correspond exactly with the Christian *nomina sacra* practice. But there is a certain similarity in the likely motivation and the attitude that lie behind both Jewish scribal treatment of the divine name and early Christian handling of the *nomina sacra*; in both cases we are dealing with scribal practices intended to express a religious attitude of reverence for what the words designate.

There is, however, a further interesting difference between the *nomina sacra* and Jewish scribal treatment of the divine name. The latter probably is connected to the Jewish avoidance of pronouncing the divine name, a scruple already well developed by the first century CE. So, setting off the divine name visually was almost certainly intended to alert readers to use a reverential substitute word, such as “*Adonay*” in Hebrew, or “*Kyrios*” in Greek. But the *nomina sacra* did not function in this way. That is, early Christians simply pronounced normally (e.g., in public/liturgical reading) the words written as *nomina sacra*, their abbreviated forms making no difference. This means that the *nomina sacra* forms were *purely visual* phenomena. If, as most scholars believe, they were expressions of early Christian piety, they could be noted only by seeing them on the written page.

So, both in their physical form, the codex, and in the deployment of the *nomina sacra*, the copies of texts, especially scriptural texts, typically used by early Christians were distinctive. That is, early Christians seem to have been concerned to mark off their texts physically and visually. I have proposed that the preference for the codex book-form and the *nomina sacra* comprise our earliest evidence of an emerging Christian “material and visual culture”. The dates of our earliest manuscripts require us to place the emergence of these manifestations of this material and visual culture no later than sometime in the second century CE, and perhaps even a bit earlier.

Other Manuscript Evidence of Early Christian Readers

In a very interesting article, “Toward a Sociology of Reading in Antiquity,” the American papyrologist William Johnson explored textual references to the reading of pagan literary texts in the Roman period, and then considered the physical and

visual features of ancient high-quality manuscripts of pagan literary texts. The textual references tend to place the reading of literary texts in small groups of sophisticated cultural elites. Typically, these texts (e.g., historical or philosophical writings, poetry, or fiction) were read in small dinner-settings of social elites, and the occasion could include ensuing discussion among the dinner party about the text read. Johnson then noted the rather severe and demanding format of the high-quality manuscripts of these texts, especially prose texts, which typically have little or no punctuation, and are written in a strict *scriptio continua* (that is, writing with no spacing between words or sentences), producing tall, narrow columns of writing with strict left and right justification [slides 13-14].¹⁶ Indeed, individual words are “line-wrapped” to achieve a rather strict right justification. He accounted for this layout by proposing that these manuscripts were *intentionally* formatted to make them demanding, to reflect the elite cultural circles in which they were intended to be read. That is, these manuscripts were intentionally difficult to read by anyone who was not very well trained to handle their format and highly experienced in reading them. In short, their visual layout is a direct reflection of the elite and exclusive social circles in which they were to be used.

I want to highlight now some typical format-features of early Christian manuscripts by comparison.¹⁷ I propose that these features likewise comprise artifactual evidence of the (very different) circles for which these manuscripts were copied. The broad thrust of the following discussion will be to propose that the format of earliest manuscripts of Christian literary texts was intended to *facilitate* reading them, and to enable the somewhat wider spectrum of readers and reading-abilities that was found in early Christian groups. That is, these manuscripts give us physical evidence of the more inclusive and diverse social composition of earliest Christian circles, in comparison with the elite circles noted by Johnson.

The most readily noted difference is the somewhat less elegant, less calligraphic nature of the copyists’ “hands” typical of earliest Christian manuscripts [slides 15-16]. There is some variation among early manuscripts, to be sure, with one or two approaching the calligraphic end of ancient Greek hands of the time (e.g., P4/64/67) [slide 17]. But the overwhelming number of Christian manuscript hands fall into what we could characterize as careful, conscientious, and competent, but

¹⁶ By comparison, poetic texts were often written with staggered lines, to indicate the poetic structure. But the more appropriate comparison to early Christian texts is with pagan prose texts and their layout in manuscripts.

¹⁷ See my fuller discussion in Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 155-89.

workmanlike and not equal to the elegance of high-quality pagan (and Jewish) manuscripts of the time. For example, there is less consistency in letter-sizes, and some of the letters reflect an informality (e.g., rounded letters) that leads some palaeographers to describe some copyists' hands as "semi-cursive" or "semi-documentary".

In his very recent PhD thesis completed in the University of New England (Australia), Alan Mugridge surveyed well over 500 early Christian manuscripts of the first four centuries or so to determine the quality and character of the copyists' hands.¹⁸ Classifying ancient copyists into three broad categories, calligrapher-quality, "professional" but less skilful than calligraphers, and unskilled, Mugridge demonstrates persuasively that the great majority are what he calls "professional" quality. By this term he means hands of competent, trained copyists, but not those who prepared high-quality literary manuscripts of the sort that Johnson highlighted. Although I find Mugridge's term "professional" less helpful than other descriptors such as "competent" and "experienced", Mugridge's detailed analysis of the specific scribal features of early Christian manuscripts gives a more thorough-going confirmation of what most students of early Christian manuscripts have judged for some time.¹⁹

The general character of the copyists' hands in these Christian manuscripts suggests an intention to provide a clear, readable text, that is, a concern for facilitating reading rather than a concern for elegance. The hands evidence a conscientious effort and, usually, competence in copying. So, for example, the individual letters are written without ligatures, clearly spaced apart, and typically of ample size (except for miniature manuscripts and some other copies that seem to have been intended for personal reading). Also, the spacing between lines is generous, which likewise seems intended to make reading easier. This produces copies with fewer lines per column

¹⁸ Alan Mugridge, "Stages of Development in Scribal Professionalism in Early Christian Circles," (PhD thesis, University of New England, 2010).

¹⁹ Mugridge seeks to argue that many Christian manuscripts may have been prepared by professional copyists, who were not necessarily Christians themselves. This is possible, of course. But I think that he fails to consider adequately the evidence that many Christian manuscripts were copied by Christians "privately" and "in house". See, e.g., Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford/London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

than in more elegant pagan literary texts of equivalent column height, as noted by Sir Eric Turner many years ago.²⁰

Early Christian manuscripts often have some punctuation, such as a dot written mid-height on a line, indicating a sense-unit roughly like our sentence. They also often feature the use of a “diaeresis” (two horizontal dots, like a German *umlaut*) placed over the initial vowel of words that follow immediately after words ending in a vowel (to alert the reader that the final vowel of the one word and the initial vowel of the other are to be read as part of separate words) [slide 18]. Pagan poetic texts were sometimes copied with some punctuation, and with lines of text written to reflect the poetic cadences; but punctuation is rare in ancient pagan prose manuscripts. We have examples of pagan literary manuscripts where the reader (not the copyist) has marked up the text for reading, putting in punctuation and other markers. But early Christian manuscripts often have punctuation and other readers’ aids that are clearly from the hand of the copyists. That is, to use an automobile metaphor, these sorts of readers’ aids were not added as customizations by owners but were “factory equipment”!

We also see instances where enlarged spaces were used to mark off sentence-size units and larger sense-units that are roughly equivalent to paragraphs or sections of text. In his 1912 edition of the Washington Gospels Codex, Henry Sanders noted that sections of text were marked off by use of such enlarged spaces, and he judged that the sections in this early fifth-century CE Greek manuscript corresponded significantly with the sections of the same texts in early Latin, Coptic, and Syriac manuscripts of the Gospels. He proposed that the wide distribution of what seems to be a relatively standardized scheme of sections of the Gospels suggests a pattern that goes back to the second century.²¹ Decades later, in his 1956 edition of the Bodmer Gospels codex, P. Bodmer II, Victor Martin noted the use of spaces to mark off sections in this manuscript which is dated ca. 200 CE, and judged that these sections tended to correspond to the sections that Sanders had identified in the Washington Codex (though more thoroughly developed in Codex W). A few years later, in their edition of P. Bodmer XIV (P75), which likewise dates from ca. 200 CE, Martin and Kasser noted a similar scheme of marking off sections of text in the Gospels,

²⁰ Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), esp. 85-87.

²¹ H. A. Sanders, *New Testament Manuscripts in the Freer Collection, Part 1, the Washington Manuscript of the Four Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 14.

concluding that Sanders' proposal was basically correct, and that the practice of laying out the texts of the Gospels in sections did indeed go back as remarkably early as Sanders had suggested [slide 19].²²

This practice of marking off sections of a text is another effort to facilitate the reading of the text, another readers' aid. But, as every author today knows, the choice of where to make one paragraph end and another begin also involves an effort to shape the text and guide the readers' engagement with it. The sections that we see marked off in early Christian manuscripts were probably identified in the course of the transmission/copying the texts in question. So, we should probably see the identification of larger sense-units such as paragraphs or sections as reflecting exegesis of the text, and as efforts to facilitate (and perhaps to guide) the understanding of the text by subsequent readers.

It is worth noting that this use of spaces to mark off sense-units, though uncommon in pagan prose-text copies of the time, is something found in Jewish manuscripts. This was noticed many decades ago by C. H. Roberts in his editing of P.Rylands 458, a portion of the Greek text of Deuteronomy.²³ Indeed, in Hebrew manuscripts we even have word-separation [slide 20]. So, it is plausible to think that early Christian scribal practice was influenced by Jewish scribal practice in the use of spaces.

In sum, we have a body of evidence that earliest Christian manuscripts of prose literary texts (especially scriptures) reflect efforts by their copyists to produce clear, readable copies, with various devices intended to facilitate readers' use of them. If Johnson's analysis is correct that the format of high-quality pagan literary manuscripts was intended to make them demanding and even off-putting for anyone but highly skilled readers, and that their appearance was deliberately indicative of the elite, cultured circles for which these manuscripts were prepared, then earliest Christian manuscripts indicate a quite different aim, and the very different and more inclusive social makeup of the circles for which they were intended.

²² Victor Martin and J. W. B. Barns, *Papyrus Bodmer II, Supplément: Évangile de Jean, chap. 14-21, nouvelle édition augmentée et corrigée* (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1962), 18-20; Victor Martin and Rodolphe Kasser, *Papyrus Bodmer XIV, Évangile de Luc, chap. 3-24* (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1961), 14-17.

²³ C. H. Roberts, *Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1936).

Early Christian groups seem typically to have comprised people of a certain variety of social levels, males and females, from slaves and day-laborers to free(d) people who owned property, and even, occasionally, minor civic officials. As the Apostle Paul noted, there were “not many of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26) in early Christian churches. Moreover, given recent estimates of literacy in the early Roman period (ca. 10-15% of the general population), many, perhaps most, believers of this time were unable to read at all.²⁴ Many others likely had limited reading competence. Very few came from the sort of elite circles that Johnson linked with high-quality pagan manuscripts. In short, there was a spectrum of reading competence in early Christian circles, with very few believers having the level of reading ability characteristic of the cultured elite.

I propose that earliest Christian manuscripts were prepared for a certain variety of reading competence, particularly to enable believers with less-than-sophisticated reading abilities to read them out in worship-gatherings for their fellow Christians. This means that, in comparison with high-quality pagan manuscripts, these early Christian copies give us physical evidence of the more inclusive and socially-diverse nature of early churches.

We could also note that we have manuscripts that are artifacts of private/personal reading. These include the examples of small copies of texts, such as P. Oxyrhynchus 655, a roll of about 16 cm height containing a copy of *The Gospel of Thomas*, the text written in a small but skilful hand, and P. Antinopolis 1.12, a third-century miniature codex that contained 2 John and perhaps a few other NT texts as well [slide 21. Re-used rolls, “opisthographs”, likewise probably represent personal copies of texts intended for private reading, e.g., P18, a copy of Revelation, and P. Oxyrhynchus 654, another copy of *Gospel of Thomas* [slide 22]. So, early Christian manuscripts tell us that they were used/read both corporately and privately.

Conclusion

I have tried to show briefly that we can learn a good deal from the physical and visual features of earliest Christian manuscripts. We have manuscripts indicating private/personal reading of texts, and others likely intended for reading in churches.

²⁴ See, e.g., William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), which has, however, received some criticism: Mary Beard, et al., , *Literacy in the Roman World*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement Series, no. 3 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1991).

In the latter especially, we have evidence that they were formatted to facilitate public reading of the texts that they contained. These manuscripts give us, thus, physical, artifactual evidence of the use of scriptures among Christians of the time.

Early manuscripts also show that Christians of this early period were already developing a sense of particularity, a distinctive corporate identity as Christians, and were developing and deploying expressions of this identity in their production of copies of their texts, particularly their most cherished ones, those that they read in churches as scripture. That is, in spite of the evident diversity in beliefs and practices among Christians in these early centuries, their manuscripts also indicate some interesting signs of emerging conventions and identifying features that seem to have been embraced trans-locally and across various circles of believers.