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# How Long Were Late Antique Books in Use? Possible Implications for New Testament Textual Criticism

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*Recent study of libraries and book collections from late antiquity has shown that literary works were read, studied, annotated, corrected, and copied for two or more centuries before being retired or discarded. Given that there is no evidence that early Christian scribal practices differed from pagan practices, we may rightly ask whether early Christian writings, such as the autographs and first copies of the books that eventually would be recognized as canonical Scripture, also remained in use for 100 years or more. The evidence suggests that this was in fact the case. This sort of longevity could mean that at the time our extant Greek NT papyri were written in the late second and early to mid-third centuries, some of the autographs and first copies were still in circulation and in a position to influence the form of the Greek text.*

*Key Words:* NT papyri, textual criticism, libraries of late antiquity

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century nearly a half million documents were recovered from rubbish heaps on the outskirts of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus (Behnesa) in southern Egypt (28°32'N 30°40'E), a few kilometers west of the Nile River and about 200 kilometers southwest of modern Cairo.<sup>1</sup> Only a small portion of this rich trove of documents, made up mostly of papyri, has been published to date.<sup>2</sup> New Testament writings, as well as a few extracanonical writings, have garnered most of the attention. Among the latter the *Gospel of Thomas* (P.Oxy. 1, 654, 655) is probably best known.

1. For a scholarly overview of Oxyrhynchus and the finds, see A. K. Bowman et al., eds., *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (Graeco-Roman Memoirs 93; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007); P. J. Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: The Lives of the Greeks in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

2. I am grateful to Dirk Obbink and staff in the Sackler Library and Griffith Papyrology Lab (part of the Bodleian complex in Oxford) for showing me box after box of yet-to-be-published papyri from Oxyrhynchus.



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One of the important finds at Oxyrhynchus and at a few other sites has been the discovery of libraries or collections of related books and documents that were thrown out together.<sup>3</sup> In recent studies George Houston argues plausibly that the evidence suggests that in each case someone in antiquity

was clearing texts, old or no longer wanted, out of his library, and had them taken out together and thrown on the dump. Support for the possibility of coherent collections being preserved in dumps comes from the large numbers of similar bodies of documentary materials, in which specific names and dates often prove that the papyri in the concentration belonged together and came from a single original archive.<sup>4</sup>

3. The first Oxyrhynchus collections were discovered by Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt during their winter 1905–6 dig. Unfortunately, their notes are vague and incomplete. See B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, "Excavations at Oxyrhynchus," *Egypt Exploration Fund Archaeological Report 1905–1906* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1906) 8–16, which contains a report of their fifth season of work, which commenced 5 December 1905. On p. 10, Grenfell and Hunt remark: "At Oxyrhynchus it is not uncommon to come upon large groups of papyri which have been thrown away simultaneously. But there remained the chance that, on some occasion in making a find of this extensive character, the papyri instead of being non-literary would consist of classical works from a scholar's library; and on January 13th we were at length fortunate enough to make a discovery of that nature." Because many documents bore dates, Grenfell and Hunt were usually able to date the layers in which they worked. See Grenfell and Hunt, "Oxyrhynchus and Its Papyri," *Egypt Exploration Fund Archaeological Report 1896–1897* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1897) 1–12, here pp. 6–7. The problem was that they often did not know from which layer their many workers recovered papyri. (On occasion, either Grenfell or Hunt, alone, supervised more than 100 diggers. Some finds were damaged; others were stolen and sold to antiquities dealers.) For a few more details, see E. G. Turner, "Roman Oxyrhynchus," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 38 (1952) 78–93, here, p. 80, including n. 8. See the helpful analysis of Grenfell and Hunt's report in G. W. Houston, "Grenfell, Hunt, Breccia, and the Book Collections of Oxyrhynchus," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007) 327–59. Evaristo Breccia excavated at Oxyrhynchus in 1932 and 1934, Ermenegildo Pistelli excavated in 1910 and 1913–14, and Flinders Petrie visited and recovered texts from Oxyrhynchus in 1922. Grenfell himself returned to Oxyrhynchus in 1920. Houston focuses on Grenfell, Hunt, and Breccia (and not Pistelli and Petrie) because of their work in recovering collections and libraries. For personal accounts of Breccia's work, see E. Breccia, "Fouilles à Oxyrhynchos et à Tebtunis," *Le Musée Gréco-Romain d'Alexandrie 1925–1931* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'arti grafiche, 1932) 60–63; idem, "Fouilles d'Oxyrhynchos," *Le Musée Gréco-Romain d'Alexandrie II 1931–1932* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'arti grafiche, 1933) 36–47, esp. pp. 45–47 and pls. 52–54. Among other things, Breccia (p. 46) recounts a find in the "third layer" (*la troisième couche*) of the mound he excavated. He briefly describes the remains of a library (*les restes d'archives et d'une bibliothèque*) found in this layer that belonged to the family of one Aurelios Sarapion Apollonius, a γυμνασιάρχης (gymnasium superintendent) and βουλευτής (city councilor or senator). Breccia says the library represents materials from the second and third centuries A.D., but he is vague as to the date of the layer itself in which this library was recovered. On the problem of imprecise stratigraphy and almost complete lack of what would pass today as "archaeology" in the recovery of papyri from Oxyrhynchus and elsewhere, see H. Cuvigny, "The Finds of Papyri: The Archaeology of Papyrology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R. S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 30–58, esp. pp. 33–38 and 47–49.

4. G. W. Houston, "Papyrological Evidence for Book Collections and Libraries in the Roman Empire," in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 233–67, here, p. 247 n. 42. For more on the general topic of collections and archives, see Houston, "Grenfell, Hunt, Breccia,"; K. Van-

Houston reviews more than 50 collections or libraries of this sort.<sup>5</sup> A half dozen of these libraries have yielded significant chronological information.<sup>6</sup> The number of books and documents in these collections range from as few as 20 to as many as 1,000. Most range in date from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D. (though two collections date to the sixth century A.D.). Some of the collections are specialized libraries; some seem to be general collections. Most of the collections, including those that are highly specialized and scholarly, include some light reading, such as novels. The highly specialized libraries include works on philosophy, medicine, grammar, commentaries, glossaries, and drafts of works in various stages of completion. Most of the manuscripts were prepared by professional scribes; many of these manuscripts were proofread by the original scribe and then by a second scribe called a διορθωτής.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that these professionally prepared manuscripts are bookrolls, not codices (as is normally the case in Christian collections). Many books in a given collection were penned by the same scribe. Dated correspondence shows that letters and documents traveled quickly, sometimes hundreds of miles in two or three weeks.<sup>8</sup> This sort of mail service facilitated the circulation and acquisition of manuscripts.

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dorpe, "Archives and Dossiers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R. S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 216–55; W. Clarysse, "Bilingual Papyrological Archives," in *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids* (ed. A. Arietta Papconstantinou; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010) 47–72. Houston's study is concerned with libraries, that is, collections largely made up of literary works, whereas Vandorpe's broader study mostly takes into account collections of business papers and records, variously described as "archives" or "dossiers."

5. See the tables in Houston, "Papyrological Evidence," 238–39, 249–50, 252–54. In the first table, Houston lists eight collections: three from Arsinoite, two from Oxyrhynchus, one from Apollinopolis Magna, one from Hermapolis Magna, and one from Memphis. In the second table, Houston lists another ten collections: six from Oxyrhynchus, one from Antinoopolis, one from Aphrodito, one from Herculaneum, and one from Karanis. The third table comes from Grenfell and Hunt's "great find" at Oxyrhynchus during the winter 1905–1906 season. In all, Houston lists and describes 53 collections. It should be noted that Houston excludes religious libraries (Christian, Gnostic, Manichean). For further discussion of the Herculaneum library, preserved by the hot volcanic gasses and ash of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, see D. Sider, "The Special Case of Herculaneum," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R. S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 303–19.

6. Five libraries from Oxyrhynchus and the one from the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. On the latter, see G. W. Houston, "The Non-Philodemus Book Collection in the Villa of the Papyri," in *Ancient Libraries* (ed. J. König, et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 183–208.

7. See K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 85–87. Many scribes reread and corrected their own work. This is seen in the case of the scribe who wrote out P<sup>66</sup>. He reread his work and made some 450 corrections. See J. R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (NTTSD 36; Leiden: Brill, 2008) 502–4. Royse remarks that the scribe who penned P<sup>66</sup> "had the goal of producing an accurate copy" (p. 544). See also Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 109.

8. See the impressive evidence assembled in E. J. 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. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 35–56, esp. pp. 52–55.

Most of these collections had been in possession of affluent people,<sup>9</sup> though in some cases there is evidence of economy. (For example, 40 percent of the books in one collection were written on the *verso* side of the papyrus, in an effort to “recycle” older material.<sup>10</sup>) Many of these manuscripts give evidence of being carefully studied. The texts are glossed and corrected and sometimes are accompanied with exegetical notes.<sup>11</sup> There is evidence that readers compared duplicate texts and engaged in what we today call textual criticism.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the biggest surprise has been the discovery of how long these manuscripts were in use before being retired. During excavations by Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus, a collection of second and third-century manuscripts was found in a layer of fill that was dated to the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>13</sup> A number of other collections or libraries were found suggesting similar longevity of their manuscripts. In some cases, dated correspondence added support to the evidence of stratigraphy.

Houston finds that literary manuscripts were in use anywhere from 75 to 500 years, with the average of about 150 years.<sup>14</sup> Almost all of these libraries and collections were multigenerational, being handed down to descendants or in some cases purchased in their entirety by a new family or collector. Accordingly, a manuscript commissioned, say, in the first cen-

9. As exemplified by the discovery of the library that belonged to Aurelios Sarapion Apollonius, one of the councilors of Oxyrhynchus (see n. 3 above).

10. Turner (“Roman Oxyrhynchus,” 89–90) comments that several official documents produced in Alexandria were reused for copying new texts, which turned up in Oxyrhynchus. There is evidence that papyrus bookrolls as old as 125 years were reused (usually on the blank backside). See G. Schwendner, “A Fragmentary Psalter from Karanis and its Context,” in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (ed. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias; LSTS 70; SSEJC 13; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009) 117–36, here, pp. 123–25. Some of these literary texts have been written on the backside of bookrolls, whose front side contains dates. Sometimes both sides have dates, greatly assisting scholars in determining chronology.

11. See the third table in Houston, “Papyrological Evidence,” 252–54.

12. An obvious example is collection 14 in the third list (Houston, “Papyrological Evidence,” 252). Here we find Herodotus, book 3, “carefully written and then annotated by at least two nearly contemporary hands, who provided variants and, perhaps, explanatory notes” (p. 258). Houston goes on to comment that about 45 percent of the books in this collection contain marginal notes, often indicating variant readings. On this point, see also the general comment in E. G. Turner, “Scribes and Scholars,” in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (ed. A. K. Bowman et al.; Graeco-Roman Memoirs 93; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007) 256–61, here, pp. 259–60. One text, a fragment of Plato’s *Republic*, is annotated with a learned but difficult-to-read shorthand. See K. McNamee, “A Plato Papyrus with Shorthand Marginalia,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001) 97–116. See also McNamee, *Annotations in Greek and Latin Texts from Egypt* (American Studies in Papyrology 45; New Haven, CT: American Society of Papyrologists, 2007).

13. Grenfell and Hunt, “Excavations at Oxyrhynchus,” 12: the collection “must have been thrown away in the fifth century.”

14. Houston, “Papyrological Evidence,” 248–51. I thank Professor Houston for sending me an unpublished study that updates his earlier work. He states that “the evidence of these collections suggests that a roll might well be expected to last for 150 years . . . in some cases rolls were kept for much longer than that.” See also G. W. Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries: Book Collections and Their Management in Antiquity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 120, 175–76.

ture B.C. would have been read, studied, annotated, corrected, and copied over a period of two or more centuries and then would have been retired in the third century A.D. Perhaps this should be not surprising. After all, books were expensive and precious and so not quickly discarded, and those made of papyrus that circulated in Egypt could survive a long, long time, as the ancient papyri uncovered at Oxyrhynchus and elsewhere testify.<sup>15</sup>

The chronology and history of usage of archival documents, as opposed to libraries and book collections of literary works, are usually not too difficult to determine. This is because business and legal papers—the typical contents of archives—are almost always dated. We have some helpful examples from Ptolemaic Egypt. These include the archive of the family of Philo Sarapis, which spans some 135 years, the archive of Patron, which was passed on to his sons and then to his grandsons, thus spanning three generations, and the well-known Zenon archive, numbering some 2,000 documents that date from 261 B.C. to 229 B.C. With respect to the Zenon archive, four distinct phases in the archive's history can be detected. The documents in the archive of Phanesis, a seller of oil, range in date from 233 B.C. to 223 B.C. From later times, we have the temple archive of Sokonbraisis in the Fayyum, whose papers span some 80 years, and the archive of Heroninus, numbering about 450 documents that range from A.D. 253 to A.D. 306.<sup>16</sup> From the Judean desert we also have the Babatha archive, comprising 35 legal documents (26 Greek, 6 Nabatean, and 3 Aramaic), ranging in date from 93/94 A.D. to 132 A.D.

In most cases, the longevity of archival documents is not great. This is especially so in reference to business and legal papers. The papers found in the archives of Phanesis, Zenon, and Babatha date over periods of 10 (or 11), 31 (or 32), and 38 (or 39) years, respectively. The family archives of Patron and Philo Sarapis exhibit much greater longevity. We may speculate that business and legal archives were in active use for shorter periods of time simply because contracts expired and legal matters were concluded, either in court or in death. Family archives may have remained in use for much longer periods of time because sentimental value was attached to the documents (as could be the case in letters from family members and relatives, now deceased, etc.). The longevity of the temple archive of Sokonbraisis may have been due in part to the religious nature of some of the documents and the value placed on them. In contrast to business and legal papers, including family papers, literary documents enjoyed much greater longevity. They did not “expire” or become obsolete.

15. On the durability of papyrus, see T. C. Skeat, “Early Christian Book Production: Papyri and Manuscripts,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2: *The West from the Fathers to the Reformation* (ed. G. W. H. Lampe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 54–79; repr. in T. C. Skeat, *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat* (ed. J. K. Elliott; NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 33–59, here, pp. 38–39; Schwendner, “A Fragmentary Psalter from Karanis and Its Context,” 127. Schwendner discusses two texts that originated in the third/fourth centuries that apparently were reinked toward the end of the fifth century.

16. For discussion and bibliography, see Vandorpe, “Archives and Dossiers,” 233–37.

Besides the evidence offered by the remains of ancient libraries and book collections, we actually have a few references in the ancient literature itself that directly bear on the question of the longevity of papyrus manuscripts. First-century Pliny the Elder (died in A.D. 79) claims to have seen autographs of some of the Gracchi letters, which in his time would have been about 200 years old (*Nat. Hist.* 13.83). Late second-century Galen tells us that “some also had desired to find very old volumes, written three hundred years ago, which I had at Pergamum, of which part were preserved in rolls, part on papyrus [χάρτοις], and part on excellent lime-tree bark [διαφόροις φιλύραις]” (*On Hippocrates* 18.2). T. C. Skeat reminds us of the story of the discovery at Scepsis of a number of manuscripts of Aristotle, which were then seized by Sulla circa 86 B.C. and taken to Rome (Plutarch, *Sulla* 26). If this story is factual, then the papyrus manuscripts in question would have been about 250 years old.<sup>17</sup>

A similar longevity has been observed at Qumran, where the life of this community’s library, as a consequence of the Jewish revolt, came to an abrupt end in 68 or 73 A.D. Most of the scrolls were 100 to 150 years old when the community ceased to exist. However, approximately 40 scrolls, many of them Bible scrolls, were 200 to 300 years old—and evidently still in use—when the community was destroyed.<sup>18</sup> The same holds in the case of a number of Christian Bibles. Fourth-century Codex Vaticanus was re-inked in the 10th century, which shows that it was still being read and studied some 600 years after it had been produced.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in the case of Vaticanus, missing leaves were added in the 15th century. Correctors worked on Sinaiticus as late as the 7th century.<sup>20</sup> The great codex remained in use for many centuries more, as witnessed by the annotations of a monk named Dionysius in the 12th century.<sup>21</sup> Fifth-century Codex Bezae (D) was

17. For a recounting of these remarkable traditions, see Skeat, “Early Christian Book Production,” 38–39. The story of the recovery of Aristotle’s manuscripts is described in J. Miller, *The Reception of Aristotle’s Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 12–13. For a time, Aristotle’s manuscripts lay hidden in a trench where they suffered damage from moisture and moths (Strabo 13.1.54). For a brief but poignant description of the perils manuscripts faced in late antiquity, see R. Winsbury, *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome* (London: Duckworth, 2009) 131 and 209 n. 16. Winsbury catalogues threats such as bookworms, mice, damp, mold, and fire.

18. F. M. Cross, “The Oldest Manuscripts from Qumran,” *JBL* 74 (1955) 147–72; idem, “Palaeography and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment* (ed. P. W. Flint and J. C. VanderKam; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1998–99) 1:379–402. Best known of the very old Bible scrolls recovered from Qumran is 1QIsaiah<sup>a</sup>, or the Great Isaiah Scroll.

19. On this point, see J. K. Elliott, “T. C. Skeat on the Dating and Origin of Codex Vaticanus,” in *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat* (ed. J. K. Elliott; NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 281–94, here, p. 293: “The text of the manuscript was re-inked. . . . This occurred in perhaps the tenth century or slightly earlier and implies that the text was still being used and read by Greek speakers or readers.”

20. B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 46.

21. David Parker, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World’s Oldest Bible* (London: British Library / Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 117–19. See also D. Jongkin, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007).



repaired “between 830 and 850.”<sup>22</sup> Many other biblical codices show signs of reinking, correcting, and annotations hundreds of years after they were produced, which again testifies to their great longevity.<sup>23</sup>

We are on less firm ground when it comes to the papyri, given their fragmentary condition (often preserving very little text and small amounts of margin, where notes and corrections are often found) and their recovery from trash heaps or from antiquities dealers who are unsure where the texts were found. However, in the cases of P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>72</sup>, and P<sup>75</sup> we may know. James Robinson thinks these texts came from the monastery founded by the monk Pachomius in the early fourth century (circa 320).<sup>24</sup> If so, then with respect to P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup>, they would have been at least one century old at the very founding of the monastery.<sup>25</sup> The survival of these papyri may well have been due to their long preservation at the monastery. Furthermore, the apparent affiliation between P<sup>75</sup> and Codex Vaticanus is consistent with this hypothesis.<sup>26</sup> That is, if P<sup>75</sup> was still being read and copied in the fourth century, when Vaticanus was produced, the appearance of its text-form in a fourth-century codex should not occasion surprise.

In sum, Houston’s remarkable findings are supported by the longevity of the Bible scrolls at Qumran, the even greater longevity of the great Christian codices, and—so far as we can tell—the longevity of the oldest extant papyri. The longevity of these manuscripts potentially has great significance for NT textual criticism.

What does all of this mean for our understanding of the literature of the NT? First of all, it gives us some insight into how literature in late antiquity was collected, read, studied, interpreted, and copied. It suggests that those interested in literature saw the need for comparison of texts, in

22. D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 282.

23. Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, produced in the 5th century, was in use four or five centuries before being overwritten in the 12th century. See F. G. Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible* (ed. A. W. Adams; 3rd ed.; London: Duckworth, 1975) 41–42, 44; Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 49. Metzger states that one corrector touched up C in the 6th century, and a second corrector worked on the text in the 9th century. Retired and discarded manuscripts were not corrected and repaired, but only those still in use.

24. See the discussion in J. M. Robinson, *The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliothèque Bodmer* (Occasional Papers 19; Claremont: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1990) 5–6; idem, *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri: From the First Monastery’s Library in Upper Egypt to Geneva and Dublin* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). The matter is further discussed in Roysse, *Scribal Habits*, 18–19.

25. Juan Chapa challenges Roysse (*Scribal Habits*, 414), who identifies the correction of John 13:19a as the only correction not supplied by the scribe who penned P<sup>66</sup>. Chapa points to several other corrections. There may even be a third corrector. See J. Chapa, “The Early Text of John,” in *The Early Text of the New Testament* (ed. C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 140–56, here, p. 144 and n. 13. In any event, it is not clear when the second (or third) corrector corrected the text, so how long P<sup>66</sup> was in circulation remains uncertain. It should also be noted that the early date of P<sup>75</sup> has recently been challenged by Brent Nongbri in a paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Chicago in 2012.

26. See C. L. Porter, “Papyrus Bodmer XV (P75) and the Text of Codex Vaticanus,” *JBL* 81 (1962) 363–76; S. A. Edwards, “P75 under the Magnifying Glass,” *NovT* 18 (1976) 190–212; Roysse, *Scribal Habits*, 616–19; Chapa, “The Early Text of John,” 149, 154–55.

recognition of scribal errors and textual corruption of one sort or another. Second, it also shows that manuscripts were greatly valued and were in use for a very long time. I want to pursue this point further.

If manuscripts were in use for two or three centuries before their destruction or retirement, we must entertain the possibility, perhaps even probability, that the autographs and first copies of first-century NT writings continued to circulate, to be studied, and to be copied throughout the second century and, in some cases, even on into the third century. This means that the original copy of the Gospel of Matthew—let us suppose written and first circulated in A.D. 75—may actually have remained in use until the time of the production of  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$ , approximately 150 years later.<sup>27</sup> If so, we should assume that the *autograph* of Matthew would have exerted influence on the *text* of Matthew, at least in the region in which it and its early copies circulated, throughout the time of its existence and circulation. This means that second-generation copies of Matthew could have been produced as late as the end of the second century and beginning of the third—if George Houston’s findings are taken seriously and not simply ignored or gratuitously declared to be irrelevant.<sup>28</sup>

Houston’s findings, moreover, may support Tertullian’s claim that in his time (late second century) some of the “authentic” letters of Paul were still available for examination. Writing around A.D. 190, Tertullian states in his *Prescription against Heretics* 36.1–2:

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings [*ipsae authenticae litterae eorum*] are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, (in which) you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; (and there too) you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close

27. This would apply to other papyrus fragments of Matthew, e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}^{64}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{67}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{103}$ , and  $\mathfrak{P}^{104}$ , believed to have been produced near the end of the second century. If so, then they too would have overlapped with the lifespans of the autograph and first copies of Matthew.

28. In this connection, it is helpful to quote Harry Gamble: “It is within this broad Greco-Roman context that the publication and circulation of early Christian literature must be considered. . . . Yet no differentiating features of early Christianity require us to think that the publication and circulation of early Christian texts proceeded along unique or idiosyncratic lines. Without evidence to the contrary, it ought to be supposed that Christian writings were produced and disseminated in much the same way as other literature within the larger environment.” See H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) 93–94. Elsewhere, Gamble (p. 83) states: “Since early Christian sources shed little direct light on these issues [publication and circulation of texts], we must again attend to the larger context and ask first how non-Christian Greek and Latin literature was published and circulated during the early centuries of the church.” There really are no legitimate grounds for supposing that Christian literary habits—producing, studying, preserving books—were in any significant way different from the literary habits of non-Christians.

to Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of apostles themselves).<sup>29</sup>

By “apostolic churches” (*ecclesias apostolicas*), Tertullian means the churches founded by apostles. Paul did not found the church at Rome, but he did (Tertullian presumes) visit it. The crucial question here is the meaning of *ipsae authenticae litterae eorum* (36.1), which, as we have seen, Peter Holmes has rendered “their own authentic writings.” But Holmes is not quite sure how to render the Latin. In fact, he really has not rendered it at all. The word “authentic” is more transliteration than translation. Holmes admits in a footnote: “Authenticae. This much disputed phrase may refer to the *autographs* or the Greek *originals* (rather than the Latin translations), or full *unmutilated* copies as opposed to the garbled ones of the heretics. The second sense is probably the correct one.”<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, the second sense (Greek originals rather than Latin translations) is a legitimate lexical option. But the first sense, *autographs*, is the more probable. Indeed, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *authenticum* as “An original document, autograph.”

I can hardly fault Holmes for deciding against *autograph*. The idea that autographs of as many as six of Paul’s letters survived some 130 to 140 years would have struck Holmes and other scholars in the late 19th century as most improbable, if not altogether impossible. But the papyri, which at the time Holmes was translating Tertullian, were only beginning to be recovered from the dry sands of Egypt.<sup>31</sup> Study of these many thousands of documents, including the remarkable discoveries of dozens of book collections and libraries, has forced scholars to reconsider the longevity of literary manuscripts that circulated in late antiquity. It turns out, as we have seen, that books in late antiquity often did remain in use, being read, copied, and studied for 100 years or more. Some of the autographs of Paul’s letters could have survived to the end of the second century, as Tertullian asserted.

Tertullian implies that the autographs of Paul’s letters to the Christian churches in the cities of Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Rome were still in the possession of their respective churches in Greece, Macedonia, Asia Minor, and Italy.<sup>32</sup> Tertullian challenges the heretics against

29. P. Holmes, “On the Prescription against Heretics,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; 10 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898) 3:260. The passage is discussed in D. L. Bock and D. B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) 45–46; as well as in D. B. Wallace, “Did the Original New Testament Manuscripts Still Exist in the Second Century?” (unpublished paper, 2009).

30. Holmes, “On the Prescription against Heretics,” 260 n. 12 (his emphasis).

31. And it must be remembered that, for some reason, the myth arose in which it was believed that papyrus was a fragile medium. This is the myth rebutted by Skeat in the study already cited (see p. 27 n. 15 above).

32. Tertullian says as much in his debate with Marcion, where he speaks of what “comes down from the apostles, which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles” (*Against Marcion* 4.5.1). He then mentions the Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Romans.

whom he is writing to see for themselves what the apostle Paul actually wrote. That people of late antiquity could readily distinguish between letter autographs and later copies will be explained shortly.

In his treatise against Marcion, Tertullian defends the authenticity and authority of the full, unedited form of the Gospel of Luke on the basis of the much-greater antiquity of the manuscripts that support it:

I say that my Gospel is the true one; Marcion, that his is. I affirm that Marcion's Gospel is adulterated; Marcion, that mine is. Now what is to settle the point for us, except it be that principle of time, which rules that the authority lies with that which shall be found to be more ancient; and assumes as an elemental truth, that corruption belongs to the side which shall be convicted of comparative lateness in its origin . . . we have proved our position to be the older one, and Marion's the later . . . a century later than the publication of all the many and great facts and records [*opera atque documenta*] of the Christian religion. (*Against Marcion* 4.4.1–2)<sup>33</sup>

In defending the older, pre-Marcion version of the Gospel of Luke, Tertullian appeals to its antiquity, in contrast to the novelty of Marcion's version for which no old authority can be produced. Tertullian rightly recognizes that new texts and versions are likely to contain errors and falsifications and that examination of older texts is important. He argues in such a way here in *Against Marcion*, as well as in his *Prescription against Heretics*, as though older texts, even autographs in some cases, were still available for confirmation, which was not the case for Marcion's version of Luke. Accordingly, Tertullian can declare that "the Gospel of Luke which we are defending with all our might has stood its ground from its very first publication [*ab initio editionis suae*]" (*Against Marcion* 4.5.2).

There is yet another testimony in which a NT autograph is mentioned. In a Paschal treatise, of which only fragments are extant, Peter, Bishop of Alexandria (died in A.D. 311), is remembered to have said the following:

Now it was the preparation [cf. John 19:14, 31], about the third hour [cf. Mark 15:25], as the accurate books have it, and the autograph copy itself of the evangelist John, which up to this day has by divine grace been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful. (frag. 5.2)<sup>34</sup>

At the time Bishop Peter wrote (circa A.D. 300?), the autograph of the Gospel of John would have been about 200 years old. Given the longevity of literary manuscripts, the Bishop of Alexandria could well have been correct. Even if Peter was mistaken and the copy of John venerated

33. Translation based on P. Holmes, "The Five Books against Marcion," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; 10 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898) 3:348–49. See also *Against Marcion* 4.5.3.

34. J. B. H. Hawkins, "Fragments from the Writings of Peter," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; 10 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898) 6:283. The original Greek treatise survives only in Latin quotations.

by the Christians of Ephesus was not the autograph itself, the copy in their possession likely would have been very old. After all, a newish copy would hardly be mistaken for a 200 year-old autograph. Whether or not the church at Ephesus possessed the autograph of the Gospel of John, they at least possessed a very old manuscript.<sup>35</sup> This is the point I am trying to make: Literary manuscripts (whether autographs or copies) were in use for a very, very long time.

But more can be said about the longevity of autographic manuscripts. We usually assume a single autograph per NT writing. But that can hardly have been the case. In late antiquity, no one produced a single exemplar of a work and then circulated it. This is well documented in the papyri, especially with reference to letters.<sup>36</sup>

An "autograph" was produced by a scribe, the author of the letter signed it in his own hand, usually along with a greeting, and then the scribe made a second copy, which was retained for the author's records.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes it was the reverse: a draft was prepared, then a polished autograph was written and dispatched.<sup>38</sup> Autographic letters would be readily

35. There are two other patristic traditions that could have a bearing on the great longevity of NT autographs. First, in a tract against one Artemon, Gaius (or Caius) of Rome (early 3rd century) states: "They [followers of Artemon] have not feared to corrupt divine scriptures. . . . For this cause they did not fear to lay hands on the divine scriptures, saying that they had corrected [διωρθοκέναι] them. . . . For they cannot even deny that this crime is theirs, seeing that the copies were written in their own hand, and they did not receive the scriptures in this condition from their teachers, nor can they show originals from which they made their copies [ἀντίγραφα ἔθεν αὐτὰ μετεγράψαντο]" (frag. 3, apud Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.13–19). The implication is that the teachers of the apostolic church *can* produce such copies (that is, either the autographs themselves or very early copies), whereas Artemon and his followers cannot. Second, in his dispute with Faustus the Manichean over allegations of spurious insertions in Scripture, Augustine (circa 400) states, "And if any uncertainty remained, we should consult the original text [*praecedens lingua*]" (*Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 11.2). Augustine may be implying that autographs or very early copies were still available.

36. Multiple copies of documents are dispatched "in triplicate" (P.Oxy. 1278) or "in quadruplicate" (P.Lond. 978). This language is echoed in Eusebius, when in reference to the 50 copies of Scripture commissioned by Emperor Constantine, he refers to copies being "dispatched in batches of three and four." On this point, see T. C. Skeat, "The Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Vaticanus and Constantine," *JTS* 50 (1999) 583–625, here, pp. 607–9. But it could also mean large books with "three" and "four" columns of text, as in fact we have in Vaticanus (three columns) and Sinaiticus (four columns), two codices that some scholars think were among the fifty copies commissioned by Constantine.

37. On the autographic features in letters of late antiquity and their relevance for understanding the letters of Paul, see J. A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTSup 101; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 118–35. See also J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 12.

38. For convenient examples of copies and drafts of letters, see J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Foundations and Facets: New Testament; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 28–30 (§6, drafts of letters, not dispatched), 81–82 (§45, drafts of letters retained for records), 83–84 (§47, drafts of letters, not dispatched), 87–88 (§51, copy of letter enclosed with another letter), 88–89 (§53, draft of letter). For discussion of drafts, copies, and appended letters, see pp. 217–18. On Roman practices of correcting and copying letters and documents, see M. McDonnell, "Writing, Copying, and Autograph Manuscripts in Ancient Rome," *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996) 469–91,

recognized, for the hand of the sender, who signed his name and perhaps added a line or two of personal greetings and well wishes, would be easily distinguished from the more practiced hand of the professional scribe who had penned the letter.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of some letters, such as circular letters, several signed autographs may have been prepared. Once again, Qumran offers important confirmation. I refer to the much-talked-about Halakic (or Legal) Letter (4QMMT), which speaks of the “works of the law” that one must perform to be regarded righteous by God. This letter, which is very important for the study of Paul, is extant in no fewer than six fragmentary copies (and because of these multiple, overlapping copies scholars can restore almost the entire text).<sup>40</sup> It is probable that these six copies represent only a portion of the original number of copies circulated throughout Israel (and beyond?).

If there were in fact two or more originals, or autographs, of most if not all of the NT writings, as we should assume, then the chances improve that some of these autographs survived on into the time of many of the manuscripts and fragments that have been recovered in modern times. It seems to me that recognition of the probable survival of several NT autographs on into the second and, in some cases, into the third century should throw the text-critical question into a new light. The supposition that some scholars entertain, that the transmission of the text of the Gospels and other

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esp. pp. 477–86. The well-known letters of Pliny the Younger, many of which were addressed to Emperor Trajan (ruled A.D. 98–117), could not have been published had he not retained copies of the letters that he dispatched (as well as the letters from Trajan himself). So also in the case of the letters of Cicero in the first century B.C. and of Fronto in the second century A.D., to cite two more prominent examples. On Cicero, see E. R. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 15–16, 156–59.

39. Zenon’s signature is quite distinctive but not easy to read, though written in large letters (see P.Cair.Zen. 4 59129). One immediately thinks of how Paul ends his letter addressed to the churches of Galatia: “See with what large letters [ἡλίκοις . . . γράμμασιν] I am writing to you with my own hand” (Gal 6:11). Many autographic letters, in Greek and in Latin, in Egypt and in Britain (e.g., Vindolanda), have been found. On the autographs on the Vindolanda tablets, see A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Graham, 1974) 23–24; idem, *Vindolanda: The Latin Writing-Tablets* (Britannia Monograph 4; London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1983) no. 30 (pp. 117–21) + pl. 4.1; A. K. Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and Its People* (rev. ed., London: British Museum, 2003) no. 23 (pp. 128–29), no. 26 (pp. 130–31), no. 28 (pp. 132–33), no. 30 (pp. 134–35), no. 31 (p. 135), no. 32 (pp. 136–37), no. 33 (p. 137), no. 38 (pp. 140–41), and no. 40 (p. 143); Winsbury, *The Roman Book*, 81. Although it is debated, a royal ordinance found at Alexandria in 2000 may bear the signature of Cleopatra, lover of Julius Caesar and, later, Marcus Antonius. See P. van Minnen, “An Official Act of Cleopatra (with a Subscription in Her Own Hand),” *Ancient Society* 30 (2000) 29–34.

40. 4QMMT is a composite text made up of 4Q394–4Q399. The abbreviation “MMT” refers to the Hebrew words *miqṣat ma’ase ha-torah*, “some of the works of the law.” The latter words are the Hebrew equivalent of Paul’s Greek *erga nomou* (“works of the law”). For Hebrew text, translation, notes, and photographic plates, see E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4. V: Miqṣat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* (DJD 10; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). Duplicates have also been found among the Aramaic letters from late antiquity. On the Aramaic letters, see J. A. Fitzmyer, “Aramaic Epistolography,” in *Studies in Ancient Letter Writing* (ed. J. L. White; Semeia 22; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 25–57, esp. pp. 28–29, 41.

NT writings in the first two centuries or so was without any controls, is highly improbable.<sup>41</sup>

Autographs and first copies may well have remained in circulation until the end of the second century, even the beginning of the third century. The evidence also suggests that late second and early to mid-third century manuscripts, such as P<sup>45</sup>, P<sup>46</sup>, P<sup>66</sup>, and P<sup>75</sup> may well have remained in circulation until the fourth century, when the great codices such as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were being produced. If so, the implications for textual criticism are significant.

The longevity of these manuscripts in effect forms a bridge linking the first-century autographs and first copies to the great codices, via the early papyrus copies that we possess. What I propose here is not meant to serve as an apologetic. Rather, it is an attempt to explain the textual stability of the writings that make up the Greek NT. Perhaps I can make my point clearer by making comparison with some of the Gnostic writings recovered from Nag Hammadi and elsewhere.

We have recovered four copies of a Gnostic work known as the *Apocryphon* (or *Secret [Book] of John*). Two of these copies represent a “short recension” (NHC 3, 1 and BG 8502, 2), the other two represent a “long recension” (NHC 2, 1 and 4, 1). There are many discrepancies among these texts. Ascertaining the “autographic” text of this work is impossible. Nag Hammadi preserves two recensions of the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC 1, 3 and 12, 2). How much they vary cannot be determined, given the fragmentary condition of the second copy. Again, there is little chance of establishing an original text. The situation is similar in the case of our copies of the tractate called *On the Origin of the World* (NHC 2, 5 and 13, 2). There are two copies of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (3, 2 and 4, 2). The copy in codex 3 is corrupt. The two versions of *Eugnostos the Blessed* (3, 3 and 5, 1) and the *Sophia of Jesus*

41. The supposition is argued in H. Koester, “The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission* (ed. W. L. Petersen; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 19–37. Koester asserts that the “text of the Synoptic Gospels was very unstable during the first and second centuries” and that “substantial revisions of the original texts have occurred during the first hundred years of the transmission” (p. 37, emphasis added). To justify this claim, Koester appeals to the text of *Secret Mark* and to agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark. None of this carries much weight. See the rebuttal in M. W. Holmes, “What Text Is Being Edited? The Editing of the New Testament,” in *Editing the Bible: Assessing the Task Past and Present* (ed. J. S. Kloppenborg and J. H. Newman; SBLRBS 69; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) 91–122, esp. pp. 114–19.

Accordingly, L. Hurtado, a respected textual critic, speaks of a stable NT text. See L. Hurtado, “What Do the Earliest Christian Manuscripts Tell Us about Their Readers?” in *The World of Jesus and the Early Church: Identity and Interpretation in the Early Communities of Faith* (ed. C. A. Evans; Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2011) 179–92, esp. pp. 189–90. In a recent study, Stanley Porter reaches a similar position, stating that “the textual evidence confirms the existence of a stable text.” See S. E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 24. The evidence suggests that texts of good quality were in circulation in the second and third centuries. For further discussion of this important point, see K. S. Min, *Die früheste Überlieferung des Matthäusevangeliums (bis zum 3./4. Jh.)* (ANT 34; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005) 277–79.

*Christ* (3, 4 and BG 8502, 3) differ. The latter, of course, has been created by Christianizing the former.

The discovery and recent publication of Codex Tchacos (CT), which contains the controversial *Gospel of Judas* (CT 33–58), provide us with additional examples. The new codex preserves a version of the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (CT 1–9), which also appears in the Nag Hammadi library (NHC 8, 2). The new codex also gives us a tractate entitled *James* (CT 10–32), which is a version of Nag Hammadi's *First Apocalypse of James* (NHC 5, 3). The fragmentary *Allogenes* (CT 59–66) scarcely resembles the *Allogenes* of Nag Hammadi (NHC 11, 3); it may be a completely different text.

The sample is admittedly small, but the evidence so far as it goes seems to show significant instability in the Gnostic manuscripts—in marked contrast to the NT manuscripts, whose text is considerably more stable. Why is this? The NT manuscripts were probably more numerous and—unlike the secretive and private Gnostic writings—were read in public. Public reading may well have created something like a “standardized” text<sup>42</sup> and undoubtedly facilitated memorization, which would also have a stabilizing affect on the text.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps also, the NT writings were taken more seriously by their readers and copyists, with the Gnostic writings—probably read and studied in private—seen more or less as “interpretations” of the dominical and apostolic traditions.

Of course, the stability of the text of the NT writings does not mean that the third-century papyri or the great fourth-century codices preserve the autographic text. There are, after all, thousands of variants. Taking the NT writings seriously, even regarding them as sacred and authoritative, did not prevent scribes from making numerous alterations, corrections, improvements, and the like.

What it does mean with reference to the NT literature is that we have but one recension of each writing. Even in the case of the evangelists Matthew and Luke, who made use of Mark, they produced new Gospels, not

42. The same factors may have been in play with respect to Christian apocryphal works, where we find greater textual variations. An example of this is seen in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, whose Greek, Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, and Slavonic versions vary widely. One of the extant Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* (not to be confused with the just-mentioned *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*) may be an exception. Unlike P.Oxy.1 and P.Oxy.655, P.Oxy.654 exhibits punctuation and other markers evidently intended to aid reading, perhaps public reading. P.Oxy.1 and P.Oxy.655 represent editions of *Thomas* evidently intended for private study. On this point, see A. Luijendijk, “Reading the *Gospel of Thomas* in the Third Century: Three Oxyrhynchus Papyri and Origen’s Homilies,” in *Reading New Testament Papyri in Context—Lire les papyrus du Nouveau Testament dans leur contexte* (ed. C. Clivaz and J. Zumstein; BETL 242; Leuven: Peeters, 2011) 241–67, esp. pp. 251–54. If the *Gospel of Thomas* was in some circles read publicly, this could explain why the one Coptic and three Greek editions of this work do not exhibit the great textual diversity typically seen in Gnostic texts.

43. See J. Chapa, “The Contribution of Papyrology in the Interpretation of the Gospels,” in *The Gospels: History and Christology. The Search of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI—I Vangelo: Storia e Cristologia. La ricerca di Joseph Ratzinger-Benedetto XVI* (ed. B. Estrada, E. Manicardi, and A. Puig i Tàrrach; Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) 81–149, esp. pp. 114–15.



new recensions of Mark.<sup>44</sup> So also in the case of Ephesians, which draws on and reworks much of Colossians, and also in the case of 2 Peter, which draws on Jude. It also means that the variants of the second century, for which we possess only a tiny amount of evidence, were probably of a minor and conservative nature, much as we see in the third century.<sup>45</sup> Given the evidence that we have and taking into consideration the probability that the autographs and first copies circulated and were in use for one century or longer, there really is no justification for supposing that the text of the NT writings underwent major changes in the first and second centuries.

44. The point is well stated in Holmes, "What Text Is Being Edited?" 116: "The authors of Matthew and Luke made heavy use of the Gospel of Mark to create new documents with different titles, rather than a revised form of Mark that continued to use the existing title (whatever that may have been)."

45. Frederik Wisse makes this point, saying that the evidence bears witness to a "relatively stable and uniform text," whose stability, given the lack of ecclesiastical controls, "would have to be considered nothing short of a miracle"! See F. Wisse, "The Nature and Purpose of Redactional Changes in Early Christian Texts: The Canonical Gospels," in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission* (ed. W. L. Petersen; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 39–53, with quotations from pp. 52–53. Wisse, it should be noted, is quite familiar with the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, including and especially the *Apocryphon of John*. More recently, Eldon Jay Epp has observed, with some understatement, "Fragmentary papyri are not conspicuous for furnishing a mass of new, meaningful variant readings. Rather, they frequently provide earlier attestation for variants well-established by later manuscripts." See E. J. Epp, "Are Early New Testament Manuscripts Truly Abundant?" in *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal* (ed. D. B. Capes et al.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) 77–107, with quotation from p. 106. There really are no proper grounds to say, as one scholar has said, that "we know next to nothing about the shape of the 'autograph' gospels; indeed, it is questionable if one can even speak of such a thing." See W. L. Petersen, "The Genesis of the Gospels," in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel* (ed. A. Denaux; BETL 161; Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University Press, 2002) 33–65, quoting p. 62.