Early Christianity

2
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Editorial

Stanley Stowers
Paul and the Terrain of Philosophy **141 – 156**

John T. Fitzgerald
The Derveni Papyrus and Its Relevance for Biblical and Patristic Studies **157 – 178**

L. Michael White
Epistolarity, Exhortation, and Apologetics in the Epistle of Aristeas **179 – 219**

James B. Prothro
Rhetorical Questions in Romans 3 and 10: A Critique of Douglas Campbell's Rereading **220 – 229**

Robert Matthew Calhoun
The D-Text of Acts 17:27 (μάλιστα ζητεῖν τὸ θεῖόν ἐστιν) **230 – 234**

New Projects
Martin Wallraff and Patrick Andrist, Paratexts of the Bible: A New Research Project on Greek Textual Transmission **237 – 243**

New Books
Markus Vinzent, Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels (Stefan Krauter) **247 – 249**
William Horbury, Jewish War under Trajan and Hadrian (James Carleton Paget) **249 – 275**

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New Projects

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Martin Wallraff and Patrick Andrist

Paratexts of the Bible: A New Research Project on Greek Textual Transmission

Gregory the Great once said: *Scriptura* […] *cum legentibus crescit* (*Moralia in Iob* 20.1). This simple phrase expresses a profound truth: that scripture grows along with its readers, an idea which can be read on many levels. In its immediate context, Pope Gregory's quotation says that Scripture can be easily appreciated by the simple-minded (*a rudibus lectoribus*) and yet always reveal new horizons of interpretation for the learned (*doctis semper nova reperitur*). In a way this anticipates insights from modern reader-response criticism (*Rezeptionsästhetik*), which does not see scripture as a static vehicle for transmitting a message from a writer to a reader, but argues instead that sense is produced in the act of reading, and hence an interaction between reader and writer in the medium of scripture. This is true for any scripture (with a small *s*) but applies *a fortiori* to authoritative (capitalized) Scripture, which is what Gregory the Great is talking about specifically (*scriptura sacra*). Scripture accumulates meaning and meanings in a process of collective and successive reading, preaching, interpreting and studying.

The temptation has always been strong, especially within Protestant theology, to seek a sort of shortcut directly from the contemporary reader to the antique author, or even to the inspired author and hence to God. This attempt is bound to fail – not because of the crisis of the dogma of inspiration or the rise of modern reader-response criticism, but because of something more basic: the physicality inherent in the process of transmission. To express this theologically, the difficulty is due to the incarnation of the word. Scripture is a physical and incarnate reality; its transmission is more than just a necessary evil where all accompanying voices become background noise, a nuisance to be eliminated.

On the contrary, Gregory's sentence can also be understood in a very physical and material way. *Scriptura cum legentibus crescit* reminds us of the fact that all acts of reading are physical realities which sometimes leave

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physical traces in the written artifacts themselves: manuscripts, printed texts, and even modern electronic texts – all *scriptura* in that word's "literal" meaning. Highlighted passages, underlinings and scribbled marginal notes are spontaneous and immediate examples. Introductions, footnotes, cross-references and glossaries are more elaborate cases. The *catenae* in medieval manuscripts are arguably the most impressive illustration of Gregory's insight in its physical sense.

The new research project "Paratexts of the Bible" (ParaTexBib) assumes this as its starting point. It takes the process of transmission seriously and treats it as an object of study in its own right. It focuses on the first part of this process: the 1,500 years in which the Bible was handed down in manuscript form, a time-span beginning with the earliest written witnesses of Christian Scripture and reaching to the end of manuscript production in Greek. In its first phase the project is limited to Greek witnesses and thus largely to Byzantine material. In Byzantium no other text was copied so frequently, read so fervently, or decorated so lavishly as the Bible. The sheer number of extant manuscripts or fragments is overwhelming. Almost all of them contain more than just the biblical text in the strict sense of the word; some of them are very rich in additional material such as introductions, poems, prayers, miniatures or structural elements (chapter titles, marginal signs, etc.). However, research up till now has never developed a systematic interest in these elements, since the manuscripts were taken mainly as witnesses for textual criticism – that is, as a means to reconstruct some distant *Urtext*. It is obvious that in this perspective (1) many manuscripts are of little or no interest if the shape of the text offers nothing specific and (2) everything outside the biblical text is irrelevant.

In the new project every manuscript is taken seriously as a witness to an act of writing and reading (or even, in its diachronic aspect, several acts of reading and writing). Manuscripts are not considered in terms of their good or bad text, or their higher or lower quality. Likewise, the interest (or lack of interest) is not based on age. In the words of Leopold von Ranke, "Every epoch is immediate to God." It is also important to bear in mind that this approach presupposes a broad perception of manuscripts. Textual transmission is more than an accumulation of scribal errors. It is a complex cultural process where the resulting (and surviving) object has to be seen from all angles, including material features, the shape of the writing, visual elements, and textual elements accompanying the biblical text. In what follows, a few definitions are given that will describe what the new project can (and cannot) do for this field.

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1. Definitions

1.1. What Is a Paratext?

For the project we have adopted a pragmatic definition of this term: all contents in biblical manuscripts except the biblical text itself are *a priori* paratexts. This simple definition implies a few decisions that need to be explained. The first is linked to the word *contents.* One may wonder whether *paratext* is a subcategory of *text* (like *subtext* or *hypertext*, where the textual character is unproblematic) or whether *para-* means something alongside the text, in addition to it (like *paramilitary*, which is similar in function or appearance to military forces but without actually being a part of them). The decision to define *paratext* as (any) content implies that paratexts can also have a non-textual character, such as pictures. The content category, however, implies that a specific meaning must be conveyed. Hence, the portrait of an evangelist is a paratext, whereas an inkblot is not. There are, of course, borderline cases, such as decorative elements or initials. There are also cases in which the paratextual character is in doubt, because not even a remote semantic bridge to the main text can be perceived (for example, *exercitationes calami* on a blank page or scribbled drawings in the margin). Practical solutions must be found for all such cases.

Another important aspect of the definition is the manuscript as a physical entity. Only witnesses physically connected to a manuscript are considered. This means that the interaction of reading and writing is constantly taken into consideration. The original scribe appears also as a reader, because his editorial choices are based on acts of reading (obviously, in the paratextual material there is much more freedom of choice than in the canonical text). A marginal note is a witness to an act of reading whose written expression will in turn have an effect on future readers. In some cases it is an arbitrary question whether a sheet of paper is or is not physically attached to or bound into a manuscript. However, a manuscript as a physical entity is a good plumb line for investigating the transmission process.

This leads to a further dimension of the definition – the diachronic aspect. Paratexts need not be part of the original editorial project of a manuscript. Both the chapter division of the original scribe and the liturgical apparatus added by a later user are paratexts. As a rule (not as an exception!) paratexts in one manuscript may span several decades and centuries. In many cases it makes sense to distinguish between several categories

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of paratexts, such as "traditional" (including elements copied by the original scribe from his *Vorlage*), "editorial" (added by the original scribe, editor or reviser), and "post-editorial" (added by a later hand – a reader, owner, user, etc.) The above definition uses the notion of "biblical manuscript," a term which is itself in need of further clarification.

1.2. What Is a Biblical Manuscript?

A working definition is the following: a biblical manuscript is a book whose primary purpose in production is or was to write a biblical text. The act of writing can have various goals. The intention to transmit text to posterity is only one possible objective, and in many cases it will not be the principal one: the book may be primarily meant for practical usage, for example, or as prestigious gift. Biblical text is defined by the Christian canon. Again, there are a few (well known) borderline cases, especially in the Septuagint, but this does not affect the project very much, since the "main text" of a manuscript is not considered a paratext, even if it is non-canonical by the standards of contemporary or later readers. In other words, the distinction between being inside or outside the canon does not coincide with the distinction between text and paratext. The Shepherd of Hermas is not considered a paratext when it is contained in a biblical manuscript (as in the case of the Codex Sinaiticus).

2. Method

Paratexts in biblical manuscripts: it is clear that the field described by the above definitions is enormous. The Gregory/Aland list of manuscripts contains nearly 3,000 items for the New Testament alone (not counting lectionaries); and, although some of them are small fragments, very few lack paratexts. Possibly the richest biblical book, in terms of paratexts, is the psalter, which likewise survives in many hundreds of manuscripts. A reasonable project dealing with such a vast quantity of material needs a specific set of guidelines on what to explore, in what structure, and in what depth. ParaTexBib aims to provide basic information about the whole field in the form of a database (e-clavis). This is realized in close collaboration with Pinakes (run by the Greek section of IRHT, the *Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes* in Paris) and with NTVMR (New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room, run by the *Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung* in Münster). The data are hosted within the IRHT structure but ParaTex-

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Bib will have its own user interface. Wherever possible, a link to the digitized manuscript is provided (in NTVMR or elsewhere). Rules are established for the registering of paratexts. In some cases the existence is noted and nothing else; in other cases full evidence is provided (*incipit*, *desinit*, identification with edited texts, etc.). There are six different levels of description.

A few practical decisions have been made in order to keep the volume of material manageable. The most important is the exclusion of lectionaries and of *catena* commentaries. (The foregoing of the latter is especially regrettable, but unavoidable: the study of *catenae* is a field of its own, with an intricate methodology and requiring a great amount of specialized knowledge.) The project starts with the New Testament, but an extension to at least certain parts of the Septuagint is planned.

The e-clavis should provide a basic overview of the making of biblical manuscripts. It will serve as a reference work for the structure and content of these artifacts and as a guide for the identification and edition of paratextual material. Of course, it will not be able to replace the detailed material descriptions that appear in manuscript catalogues. This is not possible because of limits of time and expertise, and because the work is done in most cases on the basis of digital or microfilm reproductions only.

The project is particularly innovative in that it is situated halfway between the conventional activities of cataloguing manuscripts and editing texts. The manuscript evidence is often divided between the codicologist, who describes material aspects and investigates contents only up to the point where a text is identified, and the editor, who reads the text and treats the manuscript only as a functional witness to some distant archetype. This division of labor risks neglecting important aspects of the evidence. Some smaller texts remain below the detection threshold: many paratexts are very short – just a few lines or half a page – and many texts are not part of a "literary work" with a (known or unknown) author and multiple manuscript witnesses. Colophons, dedications, and marginal notes are examples of such "non-*œuvres*." Still, they belong to the transmission process and provide important information on the history of the text in its full sense.

In a second phase of the project, select paratexts will be edited, with particular attention given to minor works and to "non-*œuvres*." A particular methodological challenge lies in the very nature of how this kind of material is transmitted. In many cases we are dealing with a "liquid transmission" and/or works with several recensions. The edition will emphasize

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the diachronic aspect, and so will attempt to be as clear and transparent on this point as possible.

3. Possible Results

Clearly, not all results can be foreseen at the beginning of any project. Research is conducted when, and because, the results are not yet known. However, it's worth saying a few words about what we hope and expect the undertaking will be able to provide.

Gerard Genette first used the term *paratext* in a publication called *Seuils* ("Thresholds"). In fact, the liminality of these texts is particularly promising. In a way they do belong to both worlds: they form part of "scripture" (at least in a broad sense), but also belong to the particular *Lebenswelt* of scribes and readers (to a much higher degree than does Scripture in a strict sense). They are important witnesses to how the Bible was actually *lived* – its contexts in worship, scholarship, liturgy, social history, material value and more.

Furthermore, a close study of paratexts may contribute to a more complete mapping of extant manuscripts: the identification of clusters and families, more precise dating, and the locating of places of production (and of reading). This approach, along with others (such as textual criticism and art history), will allow a deeper understanding of the transmission process as such. Few manuscripts can be dated to a precise year or attached to a specific place of writing; however, it will be possible by these means to group similar textual and codicological phenomena together in such a way as to make discernable, so to speak, a *habitus codicologicus*.

In a broader cultural context, it is clear that the transmission of the Bible is an extremely rich process which sheds light on the whole literary culture of a millennium. Many important insights can be gained into the history of reading and writing, the history of the book as a medium, the history of textuality, and other historical and literary questions. The millennium of Byzantine culture is more than a dark channel through which the texts had to go, in order to survive for a brighter future.

From a theological perspective, it will be interesting to note the implications of the idea of canonicity and textual authority. The debate on these issues is sometimes reduced to a limiting, "binary" way of seeing things: 0/1, black/white, in/out. However, rather than asking just "what belongs and what does not belong in the canon?" one ought to ask, "what does can-

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onicity really mean?" What does it mean for scribal practice, for scholarly activities, or for liturgical or individual veneration? This opens interesting perspectives for comparison with other (more or less) authoritative texts, such as the works of Plato, the Koran, canon law, and liturgical texts.

Last, but not least, we hope that the new project on Greek textual transmission will play a pioneering role for the study of other cultures and languages. In many cognate fields, such as Latin or Syriac, the analysis of paratextual material is as promising as in Greek. In some cases – Armenian is a salient example – the possibilities are greater still. Our project is very open to future collaboration with specialists in these fields.

The results of the project – edition of paratexts, analysis of manuscript transmission, analysis of specific paratexts – will be published in a new series, *Manuscripta Biblica* with the publisher de Gruyter (Berlin, Boston). The series is open to external contributions in all relevant fields, including codicology, palaeography, iconography, textual criticism and philology. Interested scholars are invited to contact the authors.

Further Information

The project is located in Basel (Switzerland). The team currently consists of Prof. Dr. Martin Wallraff (principal investigator), PD Dr. Patrick Andrist (project leader), Dr. Emanuele Castelli, Dr. Sergey Kim, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Schmid, Saskia Dirkse, Agnès Lorrain, Ann-Sophie Kwaß.

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