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The Four Gospel Canon in the Second Century

Charles E. Hill

Preliminaries

There are two reasons why it may not be advisable to use the term canon when speaking of the second century. First, it is not a term which was used by Christians in the second century in connection with their books (as far as we know). Second, even those modern scholars who do use the term for the second century do not agree on what it should mean in that context. Nevertheless, for some reason I cannot now remember, I used the word in the title I gave to Jeff Peterson. It may have been because many scholars have opined that, even on a fairly narrow definition of canon, we can legitimately use the term for at least the four Gospels in the second century. I do agree with that opinion, and in any case, this is what I mean by the word in this context: if books are “canonical” in the second century, they are seen at that time as belonging to a recognized, limited corpus of God-given (or Scriptural) writings. There are three elements here:¹ that a book is given, received, and part of an exclusive (restricted, not necessarily fixed) corpus. *Givenness* means there is some perception of the book as given by God in a special way: this could be expressed by calling it Scripture, by calling it inspired (especially if said to be inspired by the Holy Spirit), or by alleging it was written or approved by an apostle (if one has a view of the apostolate like that of Irenaeus, Justin, or Ignatius). *Received* means there is a perception that the opinion expressed about the book is not a private one but is the view of a group of churches, the church in general, or the church catholic: this could be expressed by saying it is “received” or “acknowledged” or “handed down” by the church before, possibly by noting its liturgical use (though this by itself could denote only a local custom). As I see it – and here especially is where some may disagree – these notions entail at least a principle of *exclusivity*. That is, it was perceived that not all books were given by God through the Holy Spirit (or through an apostle), and not all books were recognized or received by the church as such. Even lacking an authoritative promulgation of a list, or a number; even in the presence of doubts about a particular book or books, there apparently could be a perception that the number was limited. The early Christian conception, I would thus say, is not compatible with David Dungan’s characterization: “*scripture* is a boundless living mass of heterogenous sacred texts.”²

¹ These are not the so-called criteria of canonicity, thought to be criteria used by church leaders to determine which books had authoritative status. Rather, they (and especially the first one) are properties which the historian today can see in the perceptions of the sources assume belonged to the books apart from any determination by the church.

² David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible. Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 132-33.

Now, in the case of the Gospels, a number, and a list, are clearly given by Irenaeus. And so, many will concede that we may talk about a four-Gospel canon existing in the second century, at least in the mind of Irenaeus.

A second preliminary observation is that not all Gospels were written or copied for the same purposes, to function in the same way.³ This means that the mere existence of more than four Gospels in the second century is not necessarily evidence against the existence of a notional four-Gospel canon. For instance, as everyone here will know, some works called Gospels, either then or now, are not close analogues of the four. Some, specifically the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Protevangelium of James*, were “childhood” or “infancy” Gospels. Neither of these was known as a “Gospel” in antiquity,⁴ each dealt with time-frames essentially outside the main chronologies of the four, and the central figure of the latter was not in fact Jesus but Mary. In this sense, such writings could be seen as supplementary to, rather than as in competition with, the four. Church leaders may not have approved of them, but one could reject them or one could read them, presumably without prejudice to a Gospel like Matthew or John. We know, in fact, that the *ProtJas* eventually became very popular precisely among Christians who confessed only the four Gospels to be canonical.

Other works, like (post-resurrection) dialogues, on the other hand, appear to mount a real critique of one or more of the four Gospels or the groups that used them. Even though they too are not “biographies” like the four, they could conceivably be attempts to rival, replace, or compromise a Gospel like one of the four. The antagonism might vary in intensity, from the caustic *Gospel of Judas*, to the *Apocryphon of James*, to the comparatively mild *Gospel of Mary*. As to form, one would even have to include here the *Epistula Apostolorum*, which borrows the construct of the post-resurrection dialogue but apparently in order to oppose from an orthodox standpoint other books which used that same construct (the *Apocryphon of James* in particular). I would judge that the *EpAp* not only is not a rival to the four Gospels but is intended to defend them.

So, Gospels and other “Jesus literature” could be written for different purposes, and it is not accurate to conceive of them all as problematic for a canon of four, and for those that might be, not problematic in the same way. The existence of “rival” Gospels could signify that there was no fourfold Gospel, or could signify a reaction to a fourfold Gospel already known.

I. Confluence of Testimony: Irenaeus, Clement, Serapion, MF

³ See, e.g., C. M. Tuckett “Forty other Gospels,” in M. Bockmuehl and D. A. Stanton, *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 238-53.

⁴ Tony Chartrand-Burke, “The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*,” in Paul Foster (ed.), *The Non-canonical Gospels* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 126-138 at 130, says “The original title of IGT appears to have been simply ‘The Childhood of the Lord’.

Some have perhaps grown accustomed to thinking that it was Irenaeus who originated the idea of a fourfold Gospel, an idea that in his day was either otherwise unknown, or at least unpopular. But in fact, outside the writings of Irenaeus we encounter conceptions very similar to his.

Clement of Alexandria instinctively uses the four Gospels as Scripture and calls them Scripture. In *Stromateis* 3.13.93 he specifically refers to “the four Gospels that have been handed down to us,” contrasting them in this regard to the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. In *Who is the Rich Man?* he casually mentions that Mark and other Gospels were ἀνωμολογημένοι, “confessed” or “agreed upon” (1. 5). In his *Hypotyposes* he repeats a tradition which Eusebius says came from “primitive elders” concerning the origins of these four, referring to John as the “last of all” (*HE* 6.14.5-7). Despite the fact that Clement knows and has read other Gospels, occasionally cites them, at times even seems to receive something they say at face value, he displays a clear notion of “canonicity” in the sense of perceiving a limited (in this case definite) number of Gospels that are both given by God and received, confessed, and handed down in the church from primitive times.

At about the same time, Serapion of Antioch shows that he too had a body of Christian books which he had received by tradition: Despite a premature approval of an unfamiliar *Gospel of Peter* for, what I think was, private reading, he writes, “For we ourselves, brothers, receive (ἀποδεχόμεθα) both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the pseudepigraphal writings (written) in their name we reject (παραιτούμεθα), as having experience in such things, knowing that we did not receive such writings by tradition (οὐ παρελάβομεν).”⁵ That he and others receive the apostles as Christ denotes the givenness of these certain books. That they are “received” and had been handed down shows their reception. The fragment also tells us that this body of writings is exclusive, at least in the sense that Serapion claims he knows which books had been passed down to him, and is aware of “pseudepigrapha” outside the corpus. Unfortunately, the fragment preserved by Eusebius does not tell us which books constituted this corpus of handed-down books, except that the *Gospel of Peter* was not among them. But his mention of books received by tradition invites us to look into Serapion’s church’s history. We know that one of his near predecessors in Antioch, Theophilus, composed a Harmony of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁶ This was done probably in the 170s, possibly the 160s, well before Irenaeus wrote. That this did not signify a rejection of the four Gospels as individual writings is apparent from Theophilus’ *Ad Autolyicum*, where he uses the individual Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John as inspired by the Holy Spirit and as holy (clearly, “given” by God). Theophilus’ precedent creates a presumption that when Serapion says he had received certain books by tradition (which did not include *GPet*), these included the four Gospels which his predecessor Theophilus treated as Scripture and harmonized. But at the very least, Serapion

⁵ Eusebius, *HE* 6.12.3-6, my translation.

⁶ *Epistle* 121.6.15, *To Algasius*, cited in William L. Petersen, *Tatian’s Diatessarion: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1994), 32.

attests to the same conception of a limited corpus of books, handed down to him, associated with the apostles, and bearing the authority of Christ.

Despite strong advocacy of a late fourth-century date on the part of some scholars, it still appears that the work represented by the *Muratorian Fragment* originated in the second half of the second century, or the beginning of the third.⁷ Joseph Verheyden argues that it even predates Irenaeus⁸ (though I'm not sure about that).⁹ Though the first lines of the document do not survive, it is clear that the author believes that the church receives four and only four Gospels, Luke called the third and John the fourth. It conceives of certain books as given and received, and, even while acknowledging a disagreement about the *Revelation of Peter*, it assumes an exclusivity which it is engaged in making explicit.

One more indication of canon-consciousness comes from a letter of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, during the Easter controversy of the early 190's. At one point Polycrates bursts out against his critics, "I have studied all holy Scripture (πάσων ἁγίων γραφῶν διεληλυθώς), I am not afraid of threats" (Eusebius, HE 5.24. 7). If "*scripture* is a boundless living mass of heterogenous sacred texts,"¹⁰ one wonders how Polycrates knew when to stop studying? "All holy Scripture" here must have included Gospels, as the controversy had to do with the time of Jesus' passion and resurrection.¹¹ This excerpt from Polycrates may not give us a number, but certainly he possessed a "limited" corpus of God-given texts ("holy Scripture"). His appeal to a Scripture which he assumes is common to himself and his compatriots around the Mediterranean, specifically the church in Rome, but probably also those in Palestine, Mesopotamia, Pontus, and Gaul who were also involved in the controversy,¹² seems to imply a consciousness of common reception. All the elements of a canon (as I'm using the term here) are present.

Irenaeus, then, is hardly the lone wolf he is sometimes made out to be. On the contrary, we see in the last two decades of the second century a confluence of testimony from at least five contemporary, literary sources, situated in widely divergent geographical areas – Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Italy, and Gaul. All state or assume that a collection of books, including

⁷ For the contrary view, see A. C. Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon." *Studia Evangelica* 4/1 (1968), 452-61; idem, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *HTR* 66 (1973), 1-41, and G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸ Joseph Verheyden, 'The Canon Muratori: A Matter of Dispute', in J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge (eds.), *The Biblical Canons* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 488–556.

⁹ For the possibility that it may be from the transcripts of a local council, see C. E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [henceforth *JCEC*], 132-34.

¹⁰ Dungan, *Constantine's Bible*, 132-33.

¹¹ He mentions just previously, "the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel" (5.24.6).

¹² Churches in Alexandria are also mentioned in 6.25.2.

Gospels, was received by the church. At least 3 of these (Irenaeus, Clement, and the MF) specify the same four Gospels; almost certainly Serapion had received the same four from his predecessors, and in all probability Polycrates in Ephesus had as well. This requires that the reception of these four must predate them all. Much as textual critics deduce that a reading attested in multiple manuscripts of a certain date in different geographical regions must go back to a much earlier exemplar which contained that reading, so here as well. But in this case, we are not merely making a necessary historical deduction. It is what the sources themselves say.

This confluence of testimony pushes back the date for some kind of recognition of a four-Gospel canon to an earlier time. How much earlier is not easy to tell. I think we can see it in Justin Martyr – who seems to know all four “apostolic memoirs” and attests to the liturgical reading of them in Rome in his day. Daryl Hannah has recently argued that the *Epistula Apostolorum* presumes the operation of the four-Gospel canon by the 140s.¹³ I have argued that a recognition of these four goes as far back as the elder quoted by Papias, near the beginning of the second century, if indeed it is this elder’s testimony that is summarized by Eusebius in *HE* 3.24.¹⁴ The substantiation of each of these particular cases involves a level of detail we cannot enter into here. All I wish to stress at this point is that looking for signs of a four-Gospel canon awareness earlier in the second century is neither anachronistic nor a quest driven by dogma, but is what the later, clearer evidence should prompt the historian to do.

Let me now mention some of the places where I think we might see those signs.

II. Multiple-Gospel Codices

A fourfold Gospel was not a mere ideology. At least by the second half of the second century, it was taking material shape in various ways. Probably the most consequential of these was the attempt to bind them together into one physical format in codices.

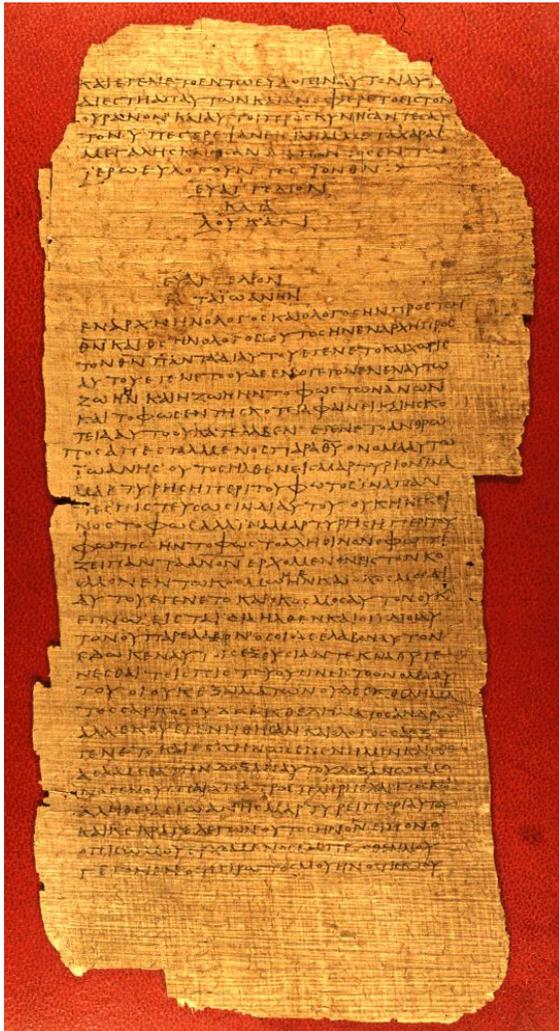
Many of our oldest surviving Gospel papyri, like P⁷⁵, were probably “single quire” volumes, made from a single stack of sheets folded in the middle and bound. But the larger this type of codex was, the more unwieldy it became; the inner pages would stick out and either wear off or had to be trimmed down. At some point it was discovered that smaller individual quires could be

¹³ Darrell D. Hannah, “The Four-Gospel ‘Canon’ in the *Epistula Apostolorum*,” *JTS* 59 (2008), 598-633.

¹⁴ See C. E. Hill, ‘What Papias Said about John (and Luke): A ‘New’ Papian Fragment,’ *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 49 (1998); id., *JCEC*, 385–94; 409–16. See the criticism of this proposal in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), 433-37 and my response in “The ‘Orthodox Gospel’: The Reception of John in the Great Church prior to Irenaeus” in Tuomas Rasimus, ed., *Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 233-300 at 285-94.

sewn together, opening up a greater capacity of text. As the technology of the Christian codex developed, so did the tendency to bind books together in a single format, thus increasing the appearance that such books, in some sense, went together.

Our first surviving codex containing all four Gospels is the third-century P⁴⁵, which contains all four Gospels and Acts. Somewhat earlier, from ca. 200, is P⁷⁵, which contains Luke and John.



P⁷⁵ (P.Bodmer XIV-XV), ca. 200, showing the end of Luke and the beginning of John

Skeat suggested this codex may have had a companion volume containing Matthew and Mark.¹⁵ P⁴⁺⁶⁴⁺⁶⁷ are fragments of Matthew and Luke, probably dating to the late second century. They represent a multi-quire codex containing at least these two Gospels,¹⁶ and possibly all four.¹⁷

So far, our evidence of Christian Gospel codices from the first three centuries shows only combinations of the four, that is, no combinations of, say, Matthew, Mark, and Thomas or John and Mary. J. K. Elliott thinks the employment of the codex to bind together the four Gospels “is in effect the operation of a ‘canon’”.¹⁸

After the discovery of P⁴⁵ in the 1930s, papyrologist Frederick Kenyon speculated that when Irenaeus spoke of the divinely provided four Gospels as almost axiomatic: “it is now possible to believe that he may have been accustomed to the sight of volumes in which all four were contained.”¹⁹ The discoveries of P⁷⁵ and P⁴⁺⁶⁴⁺⁶⁷ only enhance this possibility.

III. Harmonies and Harmonization

A. Gospel Harmonies

Codices made to contain two or all four of the confessed Gospels were not the only way a four-Gospel canon came to physical expression. Sometime in the third century Ammonius of Alexandria constructed the first known Gospel synopsis, laying the three other gospel accounts alongside Matthew. An earlier expression has already been mentioned. It is apparent that the Gospel Harmony composed by Theophilus of Antioch, and the better known one of Tatian, were harmonies of the same four Gospels, the ones said to be traditional by Irenaeus and Clement. (If Tatian used other Gospels, the evidence for it is tenuous, and in any case such sources were not used programmatically like the four.) That at least two such attempts at combining the accounts

¹⁵ T. C. Skeat, ‘The Origin of the Christian Codex’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 102 (1994), 263–8.

¹⁶ So Roberts; T. C. Skeat, “The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?,” *NTS* 43 (1997), 1-34. Cautionary studies were made by Peter M. Head, “Is $\square 4$, $\square 64$ and $\square 67$ the Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels? A Response to T. C. Skeat,” *NTS* 51 (2005), 450-57; and Scott Charlesworth, “T. C. Skeat, $\square 64+67$ and $\square 4$, and the Problem of Fibre Orientation in Codicological Reconstruction,” *NTS* 53 (2007), 582–604.

¹⁷ The codex construction makes it likely that it contained more than Matthew and Luke. See C. E. Hill, “Intersections of Jewish and Christian Scribal Culture. The Original Codex Containing $\square 4$, $\square 64$, and $\square 67$, and its Implications,” in Reidar Hvalvik and John Kaufman, eds., *Among Jews, Gentiles, and Christians in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2011), 75-91.

¹⁸ J. K. Elliott, ‘Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 63 (1996), 105–23, at 107.

¹⁹ Frederick G. Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible*, 3 fascicles, fascicle I, *General Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 13.

of the same four Gospels should arise by the 170s, one possibly earlier, seems to attest a previous recognition of these four as standard or received in at least some Christian circles in Rome and Antioch. Whether you regard a Gospel Harmony, as Bill Petersen did, as a “frontal assault on a four Gospel canon,”²⁰ or as an aid to understanding and teaching the four Gospel canon, it still seems to presuppose a four Gospel canon. And this is in line with expectations furnished by the later second-century evidence mentioned above.

B. Harmonizing or Amalgamating Gospels

The Gospel harmonies of Theophilus and Tatian are but the most visible and dramatic expressions of a wider phenomenon. Tijtze Baarda writes,

It is very likely that such documents as *The Gospel of Peter* and *The Gospel of the Ebionites* were, to a certain extent, harmonies that combined materials from other sources including one or more of the ‘canonical’ Gospels. The main goal was probably not to create a ‘scholarly’ work, the result of a careful analysis of the sources, but rather to produce a ‘popular’ harmonization: a work which contained materials compiled from various sources so that readers would have more information about Jesus, his life and teaching than could be found [in] any single underlying source.²¹

Thus, some of our second-century Gospels, while not scholarly “Gospel Harmonies,” are harmonizing Gospels, telling the story of Jesus, each in its own way, in part by combining earlier Gospels in less formal ways. In addition to the *Gospel of Peter*²² and the *Gospel of the*

²⁰ William Petersen, “The Diatessaron and the Fourfold Gospel” in C. Horton, ed., *The Earliest Gospels: the Origins and Transmission of the earliest Christian Gospels. The Contribution of the Chester Beatty Gospel Codex P45*, JSNTSup 30 (London: T& T Clark International, 2004), 50-68 at 67.

²¹ Tijtze Baarda, “Διαφωνία — Συμφωνία, Factors in the Harmonization of the Gospels Especially in the Diatessaron of Tatian,” *Essays on the Diatessaron* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 29–47, at 35.

²² “Nowadays it is generally concluded that this gospel is secondary to and dependent on the accounts of the passion in the canonical Gospels,” J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 151. See page 150 for a list of features it borrows from each of the four. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 172, also says the author “shows acquaintance with all four canonical Gospels.” For an attempt to argue otherwise see J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985); id., *The Cross that Spoke* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

Ebionites,²³ I would include the Egerton Gospel in this category (possibly the Fayum Gospel as well).

PHEME PERKINS notes the tendency of the non-canonical Gospels to assume the outlines of the narrative of Jesus as depicted in the canonical Gospels.²⁴ According to Frank Williams, the *Gospel of Judas* used “the four catholic gospels and the Book of Acts” as literary sources.²⁵ Christopher Tuckett concludes that the *Gospel of Mary*, “certainly ... appears to know the four canonical Gospels”.²⁶ The *Gospel of Thomas* at least in its present form is dependent upon more than one of the canonical Gospels.²⁷ The *Apocryphon of James*, a post-resurrection dialogue, tacitly acknowledges the catholic view when it depicts the disciples of Jesus sitting and writing their books (2.7-16).

In any case, several of the second-century Gospel productions may be viewed alongside the tendency to combine the accounts of certain already “standard” Gospels to produce Gospel Harmonies. Others, while not “harmonizing,” still appear to be dependent upon the story of Jesus as told in these four Gospels. In this sense, the appearance of these other Gospels may signify that their authors or users did not adhere to a four Gospel canon, but they offer no disproof of a pre-existing perception of a four-Gospel canon on the part of others. In some cases they might seem to support it.

²³ Andrew Gregory, “Jewish Christian Gospels” in Paul Foster (ed.), *The Non-canonical Gospels* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 54–67, at 61, says Epiphanius’ excerpts of the *Gospel of the Ebionites* “appear to contain material that depends on at least Matthew and Luke” and “the presence of material that comes from Luke strongly suggests that this gospel may be better thought of as a gospel harmony rather than as a version of Matthew” (p. 62). See also Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels. Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 210-11, “The Gospel of the Ebionites... was, in part, a Gospel harmony, a conflation of the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels, comparable to the Diatessaron created by Tatian in the mid-second century (about the same time as this Gospel was composed), except that unlike Tatian, this author did not, so far as we know, use the traditions found in the Gospel of John.”

²⁴ PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 183, speaking of the *Gospel of Mary*, 183; of more generally of other texts, 185; of the *Apocryphon of James*, 72, 191,

²⁵ Frank Williams, ‘The Gospel of Judas: Its Polemic, its Exegesis, and its Place in Church History’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 62 (2008), 371–403 at 375.

²⁶ C. M. Tuckett, “The Gospel of Mary,” in Foster, *Non-canonical Gospels*, 46, citing his book *The Gospel of Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55-74. In the latter, p 57, he refers to what he thinks are clear allusions to wording contained in all four Gospels; GMary at 8.18-19 “presupposes Luke’s finished gospel” (60).

²⁷ Tuckett, “Forty other Gospels,” 252-53, points out that even the early fragment P. Oxy 654, lines 29-30, agrees with a redactional element in Luke, “Hence the possible dependence of *Thomas* on the synoptic can be traced back to the earliest – Greek – stage of the *Thomas* tradition available to us.”

C. Other Harmonizing Tendencies

I have time only to touch on other areas which reflect this tendency to read the four Gospels together. First is in the conflation of Gospel texts in quotation – the prime but not exclusive example being Justin. At times, these conflational borrowings may have been based on an underlying, already harmonized Gospel document (probably the three synoptic Gospels without John).²⁸ But often they were *ad hoc*, reflecting the author’s unconscious or *conscious* amalgamations of texts that were associated together in exegetical, homiletical or catechetical practice.²⁹ Much as the words of Plato and Aristotle were sometimes melded together in Middle Platonic authors,³⁰ conflations of the Gospels in literary borrowings shows that these Gospels were being read together, interpreted in light of each other – the kind of thing one does when one has a “canon” of authoritative sources.

The second example is scribal harmonization. Textual critics have long noted a tendency on the part of some scribes who copied the NT Gospels to bring the wording of one Gospel into sync with another. To the extent that this was going on already in the second century, it points to the same underlying practice of reading and interpreting these Gospels together. At times this may have been semi- or unconscious, the scribe unwittingly importing a word or phrase from another Gospel with which the scribe was very familiar. At other times the harmonizing must have been conscious, and in these cases it would reflect not only a “cross reading” of these Gospels, but presumably also the notion that the Gospels could not really disagree. Otherwise there would be no urge to bring them into line.

We do not have an abundance of second-century mss, but harmonization has been observed on a small scale even in P⁷⁵ (dated to ca. 200), harmonizing Luke to Matthew or Mark,³¹ and in the contemporary P⁴, according to Wasserman, harmonizing Luke once to Matthew and twice to

²⁸ In the view of Oskar Skarsaune, Justin used a harmony in the Dialogue, but the separate Gospels in his Apologies. See Oskar Skarsaune, “Justin and His Bible,” in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (eds.), *Justin Martyr and His Worlds* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 53–76.

²⁹ See C. E. Hill, “‘In These Very Words’: Methods and Standards of Literary Borrowing in the Second Century,” in C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger, eds., *The Early Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2012).

³⁰ See John Whittaker, ‘The Value of Indirect Tradition in the Establishment of Greek Philosophical Texts or the Art of Misquotation’, in John Grant (ed.), *Editing Greek and Latin Texts. Papers given at the Twenty-Third Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto 6-7 November 1987* (New York, 1989), 63-95, at 90.

³¹ P. W. Comfort and D. P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: A Corrected, Enlarged Edition of The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001), 504.

Mark.³² By contrast, these early manuscripts apparently never assimilate to any of the other Gospels; Keith Elliott reports, “As far as I can see, the often differing wording in a dominical saying in the Gospel of Thomas is not found in even a single manuscript of the New Testament gospels”.³³

This may be the best place to mention the peculiar example of the so-called Long Ending of Mark. Mark 16.9-22, as is well-known, does not occur in most of our earliest and best mss, but is found in D and was in a ms known to Irenaeus (3.10.5). Evidently it was also known to Tatian and to Justin, and perhaps to the author of the *Epistula Apostolorum*. Hengel calls these verses “a harmonizing summary of the reports of John 20, Luke 24 and Matt. 28” expanded with “apocryphal material which has connections with Papias ... It is the first attempt at a partial ‘gospel harmony’”.³⁴ Indeed, the passage is mainly constructed from the fuller accounts in the three other Gospels, and probably presumes a knowledge of Acts as well. James Kelhoffer thinks the LE “offers an important, early witness to the emerging four-Gospel canon in the second century.”³⁵ One might question the use of the word “canon” – at least in the sense of a perception that no one could add anything to this canon, as the author of the LE obviously added something to it! On the other hand, we do not actually know the circumstances by which this conflational narrative came to be integrated with and considered a part of the Gospel of Mark. In any case, the LE shows again that these four Gospels (probably Acts as well) were being read and interpreted together and shows an example of their accounts being amalgamated, well before Irenaeus. Kelhoffer places the composition of the LE “with confidence” ca 120-150; Hengel between 110 and 125.

IV. The Perceptions of Outsiders, or Reverse Recognition

The examples to follow here are partial witnesses, none provides indisputable evidence of a four-Gospel canon. But they all provide evidence of the existence of multiple, standard (usually apostolic) Gospels in use by the Christians.

In Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Trypho volunteers that he has read Jesus’ precepts in the so-called Gospel (*Dial.* 10). Justin perceives this as Trypho’s familiarity with materials he

³² In Luke 6.5, according to Wasserman, “B4 follows other Alexandrian witnesses in harmonizing the text to Mark 2:28 (8, note 36).

³³ J. K. Elliott, “The Non-Canonical Gospels and the New Testament Apocrypha: Currents in Early Christian Thought and Beyond,” in Paul Foster, ed., *the Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: T& Clark, 2008), 1-12 at 11.

³⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SPCK, 1989), 11.

³⁵ James Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, WUNT 2 112 (Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2000), 474.

goes on to cite from at least the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (*Dial.* 18.1). If historical, this would signify outsider knowledge of at least two of the four Gospels by around 140.

Justin challenges his opponents and his persecutors to read the Christian Gospels.³⁶ Yet he does not name which Gospels these outsiders should read. Certainly not just any Gospel (such as the *Gospel of Judas*) would do. This too assumes that certain Gospels were at that time so closely associated with the Christians, that someone wishing to know more about Christianity could be expected to have little trouble finding them. No doubt they were the Gospels that Justin attests were being read and expounded in Christian services of worship in Rome, that is, apparently Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.³⁷ And when one prominent critic named Celsus took up Justin's challenge, he seems to have found all four Gospels and to have used all four in his broadside against what he called the Great Church (*Cels.* 2.16, 34; 5.59, cf. 5.61).³⁸ There is even one passage which some think indicates Celsus' awareness of a four-Gospel canon (*Cels.* 2.27).

It is interesting in this light that Aristides of Athens,³⁹ in his decades-earlier apology submitted to Hadrian (117-138), possibly on the occasion of the emperor's visit to Athens in 124-125, appeals in the same way to the emperor to read the Christian Gospel. Even though the singular "Gospel" appears to comprehend more than one written Gospel, could Aristides have meant to recommend just any Gospel? Surely not. This seems to suggest that, in the mind of Aristides, certain Gospels were already standard and associated with the Christians. Merely from materials contained in his surviving *Apology*, it would be reasonable to surmise that he considered the Gospels of Luke and John as part of this "Gospel" he is promoting, and perhaps Matthew and Mark as well.

V. Codicology

Mention of codices, above, brings up the subject of the papyrus discoveries in Egypt, as subject which could be suspected to be problematic to the evidence we have been reviewing. For it is often thought that, whatever polemicists like Irenaeus and Clement might assert, whatever the books preserved by the eventually victorious party might imply, the impartial discoveries of early Christian papyri suggest or even demonstrate the equal or greater popularity of several non-canonical Gospels in the early period as compared to the four. The Nag Hammadi codices come from a later era. But we count among our very earliest Gospel finds fragments of the *Gospel of*

³⁶ *I Apol.* 28.1 cf. 35.9; 48.3; 38.7; 66.3.

³⁷ Skarsaune, "Justin and His Bible," 71-74. It is often denied that Justin knew or used John, but see C. E. Hill, "Was John's Gospel among Justin's *Apostolic Memoirs*?" in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and His Worlds* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 88-93.

³⁸ See Hill, *JCEC*, 309-311.

³⁹ See further, Hill, *JCEC*, 396-402; id., "Orthodox Gospel," 270-74.

Thomas, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and a few other as-yet-unidentified Gospels. From this little information it is tempting to assume that during the second century all Gospels must have been competing on the same level, with no particular Gospels having standing among a cross section of the churches.

If two Gospels are discovered in Egypt – let’s say a copy of Matthew and a copy of the *Gospel of Mary* – who can say whether one was regarded as more important, more authoritative than the other? We can’t tell just by looking at them. Or can we?



[Identities to be revealed in the lecture!]

Part of the confusion may be because most scholars have not actually been able to look at them (until the internet), but only read transcripts of them. As it now turns out, there may be much that the documents themselves, as physical artifacts, can tell us.

A. Physical Format

We start with one simple and very basic datum. Over forty years ago C. H. Roberts observed, “All Christian manuscripts of the Bible, whether of the Old Testament or of the New Testament,

attributable to the second or the earlier third century, are codices, all written on papyrus.”⁴⁰ Though the codex form was slowly coming into use in the second century as a vehicle for Greek or Latin literature, its early and virtually universal adoption by the Christians as the format for conveying their Scriptures (and eventually other literature) is truly remarkable. Recently Larry Hurtado has written, “there is no New Testament text copied on an unused roll among second- or third-century Christian manuscripts.”⁴¹ (An opisthograph, a text written on the outside of a roll which already contained another work, is “neutral”.)

To date, nine papyrus fragments from the late second or the third century have been discovered which contain Gospel texts which are not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John: 3 of *Thomas*; 2 of *Mary*; 1 and possibly 2, or 3 of *Peter*; 1 Egerton.⁴² Only four of these nine are codices: 1 of Thomas; 1 of Mary; P.4009, which may or may not be Peter; and Egerton.⁴³ One is an opisthograph (P. Oxy 654, GThom., mid-third c.). The remaining four are copied onto unused rolls.⁴⁴

By contrast, the four Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John are represented 40 times in 35 mss of the period;⁴⁵ not a single one of which is an unused roll and only one is an opisthograph;⁴⁶ all others are codices.

Hurtado thinks, “it is reasonable to judge that the use of a roll to copy a text signals that the copyist and/or user for whom the copy was made did not regard that text (or at least that copy of

⁴⁰ C. H. Roberts, “Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament,” in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 48–66, at 56. With non-Biblical manuscripts “practice varies; some, possibly because they were candidates for the Canon, others more probably on the analogy of the biblical texts, are in codex form,” Roberts, “Books”, 57.

⁴¹ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 58. He mentions “unused roll” because there are a few that were written on the backside of a roll that originally contained something else. In these cases the scribe apparently simply used the writing materials at hand.

⁴² Ten if we were to count P. Bod. 5, a third/fourth c. papyrus codex containing the *Protev.Jas*.

⁴³ P.Oxy 1 (*Gospel of Thomas*), 3rd c.; P.Ryl 463 (*Gospel of Mary*), 3rd c.; P.Oxy 4009 (*Gospel of Peter?*), 2nd c.; P.Lond.Christ. 1 + P.Köln 6.255 (*Egerton Gospel*), ca. 200. Dates given here are from Dieter Lührmann and Egbert Schlarb, *Fragmente apokryph gewordener Evangelien in griechischer und lateinischer Sprache*, Marburger Theologische Studien 59 (Marburg, 2000), 23.

⁴⁴ 1 Thomas (P.Oxy. 655), 3rd c.; 1 Mary (P. Oxy 3525, which also makes odd use of *nomina sacra* conventions, abbreviating anthropos but not Κύριε, one of the four main words which were always abbreviated from the earliest times (Θεός, Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, Κύριος), 3rd c.; 1 Peter (P.Oxy 2949), 2nd-3rd c; and the so-called Fayum Gospel (P.Vindob.G. 2325), 3rd c..

⁴⁵ Counting mss which contain more than one Gospel [P⁴⁺⁶⁴⁺⁶⁷; P⁷⁵; P⁴⁵; but counting P⁷⁷ and P¹⁰³ as separate.

⁴⁶ P²² (P. Oxy. 1228). There are only three other examples of early opisthographs containing NT writings: P¹³ (Hebrews); P¹⁸ (Revelation) and P⁹⁸ (Revelation).

that text) as having scriptural status”.⁴⁷ It thus appears quite significant, though it is seldom noted, that only four of our earliest fragments of non-canonical Gospels have even the physical form which would have advertised them as analogous to contemporary copies of the four.

This evidence, and in particular P. Oxy. 2949 – the only fragment which can be confidently identified as an early copy of the *Gospel of Peter*, written on a roll – raises the real possibility that when Serapion was shown a copy of the *Gospel of Peter* in Rhossus, he may have been looking at a roll, not a codex. If so, this might partly account for his relatively casual, initial reaction to the document, as to a work whose physical trappings did not represent it as a writing received in the church. Serapion had no doubt seen copies of Theophilus’ or possibly Tatian’s Diatessaron. It is interesting to note that the third-century P.Dura 10, the only ancient fragment of a Diatessaron we have, is also a roll, not a codex.

There are further codicological or scribal features which papyrologists think may be indicative of the intended use of the document. These include, the size of the page and/or writing; the number of letters per line or lines per page; the relative formality or informality of the hand (cf. P. Oxy. 3525 in particular); use of the *nomina sacra* abbreviations; and what are called “reader’s aids”, including paragraphing, spaces between words, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs, punctuation, breathing marks, and other feature which aided the reading aloud of manuscripts. A preponderance of certain of these features can provide one more indication that a particular manuscript was prepared specifically for the purpose of public reading.⁴⁸

B. Codex Size and Scribal Effects

Early codices were made in a variety of sizes.⁴⁹ Papyrologists classify as “miniatures” those measuring less than about 15cm high by 11 cm wide.⁵⁰ As C. H. Roberts says, such manuscripts

⁴⁷ Hurtado, *Artifacts*, 81. He notes that “Surprisingly, in the large body of scholarly literature on these fragments [i.e. GThomas], there is not much discussion about the possible import of the physical forms in which the texts in question were copied” (81).

⁴⁸ Cf. Hurtado, *Artifacts*, 180-181, on the sectional divisions in P⁷⁵. See also his article in Evans and Zacharias, *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (2009), page 78, and in that same volume Charlesworth’s article, in which he lists the sectional division system in P⁷⁵ as one of the features indicative of its public/liturgical setting (citing Turner on the larger script of P⁷⁵, making it easier to read aloud).

⁴⁹ See Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

⁵⁰ These are the dimensions given by C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, The Schweich Lectures 1977 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 10-11; cf. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 235-6.

“are far too small for public use.”⁵¹ What the small size denotes is not that the texts they contained were not considered sacred or Scriptural,⁵² but that these particular copies were most likely constructed with private, not public, reading in mind.

Of the four non-canonical Gospel manuscripts dating from the second or third century which are in codex form, one and possibly two could be classified as miniatures. P. Ryl 463⁵³, a third-century fragment of the *Gospel of Mary*, is one of these. Its small size, originally about 13.5 cm high by 9 cm wide, is significant especially given its third-century dating. Scott Charlesworth has recently noted that early copies of the canonical Gospels were constructed in standard sizes, sizes which increased somewhat from the second to the third century.⁵⁴ In a forthcoming publication, he argues, “While the codex was the preferred vehicle for Christian texts in general, gospels seem to have been regarded as a special category. Early Christians acknowledged their importance by using standard-sized codices.”⁵⁵ In the third-century context, when this copy of *GMary* was made, the dimensions of most NT Gospel codices found in Egypt approximate Eric Turner’s Group 8.2 (12-14 cm wide × height not quite twice the width). P. Ryl. 463 is also written in a less formal hand with cursive tendencies.⁵⁶ The papyrus contains no paragraphing,⁵⁷ spacing, or punctuation. These scribal and codicological features all suggest a private not a public function for this text.

P. Oxy 4009 is a late second-century codex fragment from what is possibly the *Gospel of Peter*; in any case it is some kind of Gospel literature. Unfortunately we only have a sliver of this manuscript.⁵⁸ But enough remains to tell that the line lengths were rather short. This means that it was either a codex which had two-columns to a page, or, if only one column, it too was a

⁵¹ Roberts, *ibid.*

⁵² In fact, beginning especially in the fourth century, there are many miniature codices containing various Scriptural books, both OT and NT.

⁵³ Probably found at Oxyrhynchus (Lührmann, 322).

⁵⁴ S. D. Charlesworth, “Public and Private—Second- and Third-Century Gospel Manuscripts,” in C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias, eds., *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (SSEJC 13: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2009) 148-75.

⁵⁵ S. D. Charlesworth, “Indicators of Catholicity in Early Gospel Manuscripts,” in C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger, eds., *The Early Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2012).

⁵⁶ C. H. Roberts says, “a hand which, if clear and upright, is also ugly and ill-proportioned and shows considerable cursive influence” (C. H. Roberts, “463: The Gospel of Mary,” in *Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, iii (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1938), 18-23 at 20).

⁵⁷ Paragraphoi, ektheses, or enlarged first letters.

⁵⁸ P. Oxy. 4009 has a rather loose, informal hand but it does use ekthesis, indicating paragraphing, uses spacing and the *nomen sacrum* for kurios. At least one correction is visible.

miniature codex.⁵⁹ We cannot say for certain, but because two-column codices were rare in this period, it seems more likely that this too was a codex made for personal use.

We are down to P.Oxy 1 (GThomas),⁶⁰ and the Egerton Gospel,⁶¹ both early codices not of miniature size, as the two non-canonical Gospel fragments which most approximate copies of the four canonical Gospels in their basic physical features. Their formats enable the supposition that they could have been made on analogy with copies of one of the four and could have been intended for public reading (at least they are made to look that way). Egerton in particular makes liberal use of punctuation, liberal – but also eccentric – use of the *nomina sacra* abbreviations (Moses; Isaiah; kings; prophets; even the verb prophesy!). This copy may well have been made by a scribe who was consciously imitating – one might almost say exaggerating, or simply executing in an idiosyncratic way – such features as the scribe had seen in manuscripts of the four Gospels. This coheres with its apparent dependency on the Johannine and some Synoptic Gospels in terms of content.

Nearly all of the early codices containing one or more of the four Gospels, on the other hand, correspond to rather standardized codex sizes. Only P⁷⁷ (ca. 15x10cm.) and P¹⁰³ (ca. 16x11cm.) – two fragments thought by some to be from the same manuscript of Matthew – are near the border of the miniature category.⁶² And this would fit their early dating to the late second century, when Gospel codices tended to be a bit smaller.

This does not mean that all 34 canonical Gospel codices were actually used for liturgical reading; certainly many were not. Charlesworth identifies 15 (containing 16 copies of one of the 4 canonical Gospels) which he thinks, due to their size and the level and type of reader's aids they employ, indicate they were made for public use.⁶³ But even the basic formats of most of the “non-liturgical” copies are similar enough (in size, in codex format, *nomina sacra* techniques, and partial use of reader's aids) to show that the copying of many of these private texts was probably not far removed from more “standard” exemplars produced for public, liturgical use. Such features are not the norm among early non-canonical Gospel papyri.

⁵⁹ Ed. princeps.

⁶⁰ 9.7 x 15 according to Van Haelst; Charlesworth thinks originally 10 x 28 (personal correspondence). If Charlesworth is correct, it would have been a codex of very unusual dimensions.

⁶¹ Wieland Willker estimates originally ca. 13 x 20.

⁶² Despite their relatively small size, P⁷⁷ shows the use of various reading aids and concern for accuracy: paragraphoi, spacing, punctuation, diaeresis, rough breathing marks, and interlinear correction.

⁶³ Charlesworth, “Indicators of Catholicity”. As I think P⁴ and P⁶⁴⁺⁶⁷ are part of the same multi-Gospel codex, I would say there are 14 mss (if P⁷⁷ and P¹⁰³ are parts of the same codex, there are 13), containing the 16 copies.

Charlesworth maintains that the evidence now justifies C. H. Roberts's statement that there was a significant "degree of organization, of conscious planning, and uniformity of practice" in the early copying of NT mss,⁶⁴ in particular, the four Gospels. The effects of such planning and uniformity of practice are ignored when we simply count the raw numbers of canonical versus non-canonical manuscripts reclaimed from the Egyptian sands. Taking into account features such as the book format, the codex size, and the way the copying was executed, it is quite clear that "not all Gospels were created equal." They were not endowed by their creators with the same inalienable rights (at least the same codicological and scribal features!). Distinctions between them were usually made even at the production stage, as they were being prepared and copied as material objects.

C. "Diplae Sacrae"⁶⁵

The scribes responsible for copying the great fourth- and fifth-century Biblical codices (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Codex Bezae, Alexandrinus, Claromontanus and later ones) often placed marks, little arrows known as diplai (I'll call them diples), in the margins of NT books where a NT writer was citing from Scripture.

Clearly (it seems to me), if these signs were meant to mark quotations of Scripture, one had to know which quotations to mark and which ones not to mark. In other words, the scribe had to be operating with a notion of "canon" – an exclusive body of Scripture. Examples: Codex Alexandrinus (5th c) does not mark Acts 17.28, where Paul, in his speech before the Aeropagus, quotes the pagan writer Aratus; nor does it mark Titus 1.12 where there is a citation of Epimenides; nor does it cite Jude 14-15 where Jude cites 1 Enoch.

It is not surprising to see a scribal practice like this in the fourth and fifth centuries, and later. By this time, all will admit that notions of canonicity were operating in the church and among its trained scribes. The question is: how far back does it go? I have not been able to find these markings in any of our pre-fourth-century NT manuscripts, where the authors cite OT Scripture. In fact, it appears that the practice did not originate in the copying of biblical manuscripts but in the copying of other theological writings which quoted Scripture. This is what is referenced by the only ancient source I have been able to find who comments on the practice. Isidore of

⁶⁴ Roberts, *Manuscript*, 41, cited by Charlesworth, "Catholicity".

⁶⁵ For a fuller presentation of the evidence see Charles E. Hill, "Irenaeus, the Scribes, and the Scriptures. Papyrological and Theological Observations from P.Oxy 3.405" in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, eds., *Irenaeus and His Traditions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming 2012).

Seville, early in the 7th century, wrote this about the diplo in his *Etymologies*, “Our scribes place this in books of churchmen to separate or to make clear the citations of Sacred Scriptures.”⁶⁶

So far, I have come across 3 (or 4, if P⁷ is late third-century),⁶⁷ pre-fourth-century non-Biblical manuscripts which show the practice was in use then. One is a late third-century copy of two treatises of Philo of Alexandria, copied by a Christian scribe. In several places where Philo quotes the OT, this Christian scribe has placed dipoles in the margin. The two remaining mss are earlier. One, P.Mich. xviii.764, is a fragment of a theological work by an unknown author which was dated by its first editor to the second or the third century.⁶⁸

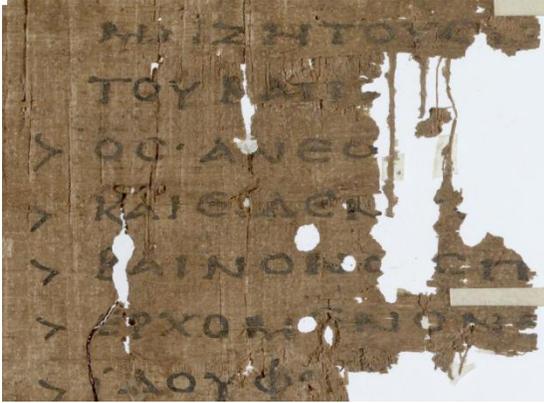
The other mss is the earliest fragment we have of Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, discovered at Oxyrhynchus, P. Oxy .405, a text which C. H. Roberts thought belonged to the second century; as he quipped, it “reached Oxyrhynchus not long after the ink was dry on the author’s manuscript.”⁶⁹ One can see in each how the scribe clearly marked the lines in which there is a quotation from Scripture.

⁶⁶ The text of Cod. Sang. 231 is, *diple hanc scriptores nostri apponunt in libris ecclesiasticorum virorum adseparanda vel demonstranda testimonia sanctorum scripturarum*. The translation is that of Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Isidore goes on to specify different modifications of the diplo (with one or two dots, with obelisk, reverse diplo, etc.) which serve other critical functions in literary texts. According to M. B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect. An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 58, the principal use of the diplo in medieval manuscripts, according to was to mark where an author was citing Scripture.

⁶⁷ P⁷ is a fragment of an unidentified theological work which also uses the diplo when quoting Luke 4.1-2. Unfortunately this ms, transcribed by von Soden in 1902 and Gregory in 1903 at the Archäologischen Museum der Geistlichen Akademie in Kiev, is now lost. See Kurt Aland, *Studien zur Überlieferung des Neuen Testaments und seines Textes* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1967), 137-140. It contained the *nomina sacra* for Jesus (IC) and Spirit (PNC, PNI). The kurzgefasste Liste has it as “III/IV (?)” (<http://intf.unimuenster.de/vmr/NTVMR/ListeHandschriften.php>).

⁶⁸ Cornelia Eva Römer, “7.64. Gemeinderbrief, Predict oder Homilie über den Menschen im Angesicht des Jüngsten Gerichts,” in Cornelia E. Römer and Traianos Gagos, eds., *P. Michigan Koenen (= P. Mich. Xviii). Michigan Texts Published in Honor of Ludwig Koenen* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), 35-43.

⁶⁹ C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1977 (London, 1979), 53. Of course, we really do not know when it reached Oxyrhynchus. Roberts elsewhere suggests that the ms may have been produced in a scriptorium either in Alexandria – perhaps in relation to the school founded by Pantaenus – or in Oxyrhynchus itself (24).



P.Oxy 3.405, Irenaeus, Against Heresies, late-second century, roll

It seems to me that this is evidence – hard, cold, artifactual evidence – that some Christians by at least the end of the second century were operating with an assumption of a canon of Scripture. And what is especially interesting is that these very early fragments (plus P⁷) show the scribe marking not just OT text, but NT texts. P.Mich. xviii.764 marks citations of both Jeremiah and 1 Corinthians; P. Oxy. 405 marks a citation of Matthew’s Gospel; P⁷ of Luke’s.

At least by the end of the second century, if not before, some Christian scribes were making distinctions between Christian sacred books, including the four Gospels, and other books in interesting and important ways. The physical properties of P.Oxy 405 show us two ways in which this was done. First, this copy of Irenaeus’ writing is made on a roll and not a codex. Second, the words of Scripture contained in this roll are distinguished from the words of Irenaeus by *diples* in the margin. Some Christian scribes were employing this sign in Christian books to enact visually what, one might say, was expected to take place in the mind of the reader (perhaps of the next copyist as well), a setting-apart of certain words by quite literally “pointing them out.”

Conclusion

I have not tried to answer the question of how early the perception of a four-Gospel canon might go. I mentioned above, however, that I think Papias’ elder is the source for an anonymous tradition referenced by Eusebius in *HE* 3.24.5-13, which concerns the origins of all four of the Gospels (John’s assumed to be the last). And Papias must have gained this tradition from the elder at a point quite early in the second century. Indisputably, from the well-known material Eusebius formally attributes to Papias and this elder in *HE* 3.39.15-16, we know the elder was concerned with the origins of a Gospel which went under the name of Mark, and that Papias also reported a tradition about one under the name of Matthew. And if Papias is the source in *HE* 3.24.5-13, then we may say that the elder gave tradition about all four. As relatively confident as

I am of this, because Eusebius leaves the tradition in *HE* 3.24.5-13 anonymous, we perhaps are deprived of certainty – barring new discoveries. But if indeed a perception of the congruency and “givenness” of these four does go back to somewhere near this time, it would go a long way toward explaining why words and ideas found in these Gospels keep appearing in literary sources from very early on; why these four in particular were used as a basis of other, harmonizing Gospels; why they appear in conflational citations and in harmonizing variants in Gospel manuscripts; why some wrote hostile “Gospels” against them and why Marcion based his textual “salvaging” efforts on one of them; why congregations in Justin’s circles in Rome read and expounded them in liturgical settings; why Theophilus and Tatian harmonized just these four Gospels; and why scribes began to bind these four together in codices, even apparently in standard sizes, with reader’s aids⁷⁰ – all in the second century.

As we have seen, there tend to be significant differences between the physical features of the earliest canonical Gospel manuscripts and the earliest non-canonical ones. Again I would stress that the existence of these differences should not be interpreted to mean that nobody ever considered Gospels other than the four to be authoritative, “inspired”, or even Scriptural. But it does suggest that Christians who might have regarded them in these ways probably stood apart from what appears to be the mainstream. And this, after all, is just what Irenaeus said was the case. It now appears that writings such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Gospel of Peter* either tended to be regarded differently from the four, even by those who copied them, or else those who copied them tended to belong to different scribal networks⁷¹ from those who copied the canonical Gospels. Either conclusion seems significant.

⁷⁰ There has long been debate over why Christians adopted the codex format. Given that the majority of non-canonical Gospels are rolls, it seems that at least for Gospels, the codex was both an element of standardization (Eldon J. Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in William L. Petersen, ed., *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 71–103, esp. 101-102) and functioned to add a layer of complexity to production, making it harder for rivals to imitate the Gospels. Rolls were sold ready-made, in standard lengths, but each codex had to be constructed *de novo* and required a significant, extra level of planning and “know how”. Of course, this was hardly a fool-proof deterrent (witness the early non-canonical codices cited above) and in time, the codex format came to be preferred for all kinds of literature.

⁷¹ On scribal networks, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).