

# THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE CANON

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SUMMARY: I. *Numerical comparisons* II. *Formal features*. III. *Textual stability*. IV. *Collections of “scriptural” books*. V. *Scriptural citations on amulets*. VI. *Conclusion*.

The available evidence from literary sources about the use of certain books considered authoritative in the first centuries of Christianity is the object of a number of different interpretations. These are not only due to the hermeneutical assumptions of the interpreters, but above all to the scarcity of the evidence. We know very little about which books might have been thought to have some sort of authority before the canon was fixed. Did writings exist that were considered “canonical”<sup>1</sup> and recognized as such before the fourth century? Or, in order to know which books are “canonical”, can we only rely on the ecclesiastical lists and declarations produced in that century? We know that the codices Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, as witnesses to a set of books that substantially coincide with the list collected by Athanasius in his *Festal Letter*, show in a material way the works that in the fourth and fifth centuries constituted what would later become the Biblical canon.<sup>2</sup> But why these books and not others were part of this sacred list is subject to a debate that at the present time is impossible to settle. It is not just a matter of interpreting the historical and literary data at

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Prof. Juan Hernández Jr., of Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, for his helpful suggestions and criticism. All errors or shortcomings in this work, however, are exclusively mine. Given the problematic usage of the terms “canonical” and “apocryphal” and the anachronism that may involve using them in a historical analysis, they appear within inverted commas throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup> On this letter, see, for example, E.E. GALLAGHER, J.D. MEADE. *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity. Texts and Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, 118-129. The differences between Athanasius’ letter and the contents of the codices regard mainly the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which is not mentioned by Athanasius and is included in codex Sinaiticus, and the books of *Maccabees* and *1* and *2 Clement*, not mentioned in the *Festal Letter* but witnessed by codex Alexandrinus.

our disposal according to cultural, sociological, economic or political criteria. It is also, and mainly, a question that depends on how Scripture is conceived and what is understood by the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, despite of the limitations they present, the extant early manuscripts that witness to books that would be considered “biblical” might offer interesting data about which writings were the ones that had difficulty achieving “canonical” status in early Christianity and what treatment they received with respect to other texts.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the purpose of this article is to present a summary of that information with the aim of shedding some light on the history of the process that led to the compilation of a list of normative books.<sup>5</sup> The article has no pretension of originality. However, reviewing recent studies on the early combination of “biblical” books and early Christian amulets, which are less frequently invoked in dealing with the history of the canon, might add some new insights to the question.

But before starting, some reminders and observations are needed. First, in relation to the debate on the history of the canon. As is known, there are two main opinions on the question that appear irreconcilable. One maintains that in the second century there was already a closed body of canonical writings which formed the New Testament. The other argues that the canon was not closed until the fourth century.<sup>6</sup> The first view, held by Trobisch, although attractive in many respects, presents significant problems and does not find sufficient support in the manuscript evidence.<sup>7</sup> The second, much more accepted, admits two main

<sup>3</sup> J.C. OSSANDÓN-WIDOW, *On the Formation of the Biblical Canon: An Extended Review of L. M. McDonald's Book*, «*Annales Theologici*» 24 (2010) 437-452, esp. 443-450.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent approach to the different way of using the various books existing in these centuries, see J. SCHRÖTER, *The Use of 'Canonical' and 'Non-canonical' Texts in Early Christianity*, in T. NICKLAS, J. SCHRÖTER (eds.), *Authoritative Writings in Early Judaism and Early Christianity. Their Origin, Collection, and Meaning*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2020, 129-164.

<sup>5</sup> This interest is underscored by C. MARKSCHIES, *The Canon of the New Testament in Antiquity. Some New Horizons for Future Research*, in M. FINKELBERG, G. STROUMSA (eds.), *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond. Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (JSRC 2), Brill, Leiden 2003, 175-194, who argues regarding the research on the canon: «The traditional attention to great theologians and to the juridical system should be supplemented by the examination of which types of canons and books of contents of canons appeared in the public, liturgical and private lives of ancient Christians [...]. Which manuscripts or codices were used by an average Christian community? Which canonical texts were at the disposal of an ordinary layman, and which could one find in an average community library?» (p. 175).

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. M. DORMANDY, *How the Books Became the Bible: The Evidence for Canon Formation from Work-Combination in Manuscripts*, «TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism» 23 (2018) 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> D. TROBISCH, *The First Edition of the New Testament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2000. See, for example, the review by D.C. PARKER, «*Journal of Theological Studies*» 53 (2002) 298-305 and by J.T. LARSON, «TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism» 6 (2001), and the remarks by M.W. HOLMES, *The Biblical Canon*, in S. ASHBOOK HARVEY, D.G. HUNTER (eds.),

positions. For some scholars the closing of the canon is an external decision—and there was nothing in some specific books that revealed that they alone would be selected as canonical—, while for others the fixing of the canonical list is just a declaration of what was already known. Obviously, which of the two is closer to the truth cannot be solved here, but the study of the early manuscripts may help us assess whether some of the opinions on this topic are more likely than others.

The second observation is the necessity of considering the limitations that result from the analysis of the manuscripts themselves. One of these limitations derives from the dates assigned to manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of them are paleographically dated and, therefore, we do not know for sure when they were copied. The most we can say is that they might come from a particular century (or from the middle of a century to the middle of the next), bearing in mind that very few of them can be assigned to the second century and that the practice of assigning one specific century may in fact be too narrow a designation.<sup>9</sup> A handful of fragments might have been copied during this period, but even if we assign some disputed fragments to it the total number of second century manuscripts can be counted on one hand.

Another limitation comes from the problems intrinsic to archaeological discoveries and, on a lower scale, to the editorial criteria used by owners of the various collections. Fortune has allowed only a few samples of early manuscripts to survive—most of them fragmentary—and not all of them have been published yet. Consequently, the information that we can draw from these manuscripts is at most provisional, as we do not know how representative these witnesses are of what was produced at the time they were copied, especially when we only have direct knowledge of a very small percentage of the many literary works that were written in antiquity.<sup>10</sup> This issue, that affects every study of early manuscripts, reminds us of the provisional nature of any conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

*The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, 421, n. 3. There are other authors with views similar to those of Trobisch but more moderate, defending, for example, that the collections of the four gospels (Stanton, Heckel) and of the Pauline corpus (Gamble) were already fixed by the end of the second century. Cfr. DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent and clear treatment of this question, see B. NONGBRI, *God's Library. The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London 2018, 63-64.

<sup>9</sup> R.S. BAGNALL, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, Princeton University Press, Princeton – Oxford 2009, 1-24.

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy what MARKSCHIES, *The Canon*, 175, affirms: «We only possess 14% of the Christian literature of the 2nd century that, according to our sources, must have existed once».

<sup>11</sup> See also A.-M. LUIJENDIJK, *Sacred Scriptures as Trash: Biblical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus*, «*Vigiliae Christianae*» 64 (2010) 217-240, on the fact that many of the texts that we have come from rubbish mounds.

## I. NUMERICAL COMPARISONS

In the first centuries of Christianity there was an abundant literary production. Out of it, some original witnesses have survived to this day, mostly in very defective conditions. Is what has come down to us a mirror of what was considered most relevant and / or enjoyed the greatest popularity when those works were written? Or do these remains distort the reality of their time because they only offer partial information? In other words, do these texts reflect what people really read? Is there a relationship between the number of extant texts and the popularity of those works? If so, what made a particular literary work more widely known? Its quality, its use, its normative character for a group of people, other reasons? And, by way of example, to what extent is the abundant Christian—and to a lesser extent Jewish—literature that has been excavated in the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus representative of what was actually read in that city and in other parts of the world where Jews and Christians lived? Is the Nag-Hammadi site a special case or just one among many others? How can we know what was read by a considerable number of people and what was read only in small groups? There are no answers to these and other similar questions. Surely, factors that escape literary criteria intervened in the greater circulation of some books. It is reasonable to think that, then as today, what was most read depended in what aroused the greatest interest. But this interest could be motivated by very different reasons. The ability to entertain, for example, can turn a mediocre work into a best-seller, in the same way as a religious text might become more popular and, therefore, more copied than others to meet the needs of followers who held that text in high esteem or even regarded it as normative. This and other reasons advise us not to press the data too much and to be cautious regarding the conclusions we derive from the actual numbers of extant NT manuscripts that reached the status of “Scripture”, all the more if we want to extract relevant data for the history of the canon from these numbers.

Nevertheless, with the information at hand, it is possible to suggest or at least point towards what, apparently, could have been read more by Christians in the first four centuries of our era. For this purpose, I will resort to a study by Daniel Stökl on the figures of surviving early papyri from Egypt and their meaning for the history of the canon, as it serves to show how the number of witnesses for books that would later be defined as “canonical” and “apocryphal” is distributed in the first five centuries of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The author’s starting point is that

<sup>12</sup> D. STÖKL, *Canonization – a Non-Linear Process? Observing the Process of Canonization through the Christian (and Jewish) Papyri from Egypt*, «Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum» 12 (2008) 192-214. See also other related articles by the same author: IDEM, *Weighing the Parts. A Papyrological Perspective on the Parting of the Ways*, «Novum Testamentum» 51 (2009) 168-

supply corresponds to demand and thus the more important an author is, the more his text is used.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Stökl argues, the more papyri we find, the more information we have about the books that were used more frequently by a “textual community”.<sup>14</sup>

Again, his conclusions should be taken with caution due to the difficulties of dating these texts and because his study was published some years ago and, since then, new papyri have been edited and published.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it should be noticed that there are more papyri from the second and third centuries than from the fourth and fifth centuries, not necessarily because literary production declined during these two centuries, but perhaps because of the random nature of the discoveries and/or because of a dating method that might have led manuscripts to be dated too early.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as has been said, the dating of the papyri can only be tentative. Table 1 shows Stökl’s figures:<sup>17</sup>

<i>Century</i>	II	III	IV	V	<i>Total</i>
“Canonical”	12.0	72.8	82.5	85.2	252.4
“Deuterocanonical”	1.8	11.2	12.5	9.5	35.0
“Apocryphal”	3.0	9.5	17.0	9.0	38.5
<i>Total</i>	16.8	93.5	112.0	103.7	325.9

After collecting the numbers of the different types of books, Stökl summarises his results as follows:<sup>18</sup> a) From the second to the fifth century, Christian literary

186; IDEM, *De l’arbre à la forêt: Quelques pensées quantitatives sur les papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens de l’Égypte ancienne*, in C. CLIVAZ, J. ZUMSTEIN (eds.), *Reading New Testament Papyri in Context – Lire les papyrus du Nouveau Testament dans leur contexte* (BETL 242), Peeters, Leuven 2011, 169-188.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. H.Y. GAMBLE, *The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis*, in L.M. McDONALD, J.A. SANDERS (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Hendrickson, Peabody 2002, 273.

<sup>14</sup> His aim is to clarify the process of canonization in early Christianity based on the information taken from the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB). Cfr. STÖKL, *Canonization*, 195.

<sup>15</sup> The author is aware of the problems and advises on the caution with which the data he offers should be taken, as he limits himself to Greek texts and only to those coming from Egypt. In addition to the dating problems, he acknowledges the difficulty of identifying fragments. Moreover, he does not take into account the best-preserved papyri we have because he thinks that they may come from libraries and therefore are not representative for his study. Cfr. STÖKL, *Canonization*, 196-197.

<sup>16</sup> See NONGBRI, *God’s Library*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Adapted from STÖKL, *Canonization*, 201. For quantifying purposes, the author establishes that manuscripts assigned to two centuries count 50% for each century (to three or more centuries count 33% or 25% for each century, and so on).

<sup>18</sup> Stökl applies Athanasius’ distinction of “canonical” books, “deuterocanonical” books, that is, those that he considered useful to be read by catechumens, and “apocryphal” books, those that remained outside the canon.

preferences are moving towards the centre and readers are less interested in “apocryphal” literature. b) This movement, however, is not linear, since in the fourth century there seems to be renewed interest in the “deuterocanonical” and “apocryphal” books of both the Old and New Testaments (for example, *1 Enoch*, *Jannes and Jambres*, *Acts of Paul*), perhaps in connection with the preferences of some new Christian movements (Meletians, Arians, monasticism) and Manicheans. c) At the time in which the canon is not defined, the edges of what was accepted as normative were blurred. However, the papyrological data, which show a greater diffusion of “apocryphal” texts from the fourth century onward, coincide with the testimonies of various Church Fathers regarding heretical ideas and the reading of “non-canonical” scriptures, and seem to agree with the impact that ecclesiastical decisions were having in relation to the canon. d) A distinction must be made between “deuterocanonical” and “apocryphal” books. The former group behave in a very similar way to the canonical ones, especially in the case of the “deuterocanonical” writings of the New Testament. For example, the *Shepherd of Hermas* was as popular or even more so than many “canonicals” works.<sup>19</sup>

If the numbers offered by Stökl are compared to and updated with the numbers of Christian manuscripts coming from Oxyrhynchus, insofar as this city may offer a more precise picture of what was more popular there, as there are thousands of papyrus fragments coming from its rubbish mounds, we get a similar picture. Out of the 163 Christian books known to come from this city,<sup>20</sup> there is a total of 129 books of “biblical” nature.<sup>21</sup> Of these, 87 are items of future “canonical” books: 30 from the Old Testament and 67 from the New Testament (34 gospels, 25 letters, 3 Acts, 5 apocalypses); 13 items are of the “deuterocanonical” books: 2 from the Old Testament (*Sirach* and *Wisdom of Solomon*) and 11 from the New (10 from *Hermas* and 1 from the *Didache*); 19 items are of the “apocryphal”: 4 from the Old Testament (*Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Baruch*, *6 Esdras*, *Jannes and Jambres*) and 15 from the New (10 from evangelical fragments, 4 from “apocryphal” *Acts* and 1 from the *Nativity of Mary*).

If we divide these numbers by the centuries, using the criterion followed by Stökl of counting 50% manuscripts assigned to two centuries, we observe that there are fewer extant papyri from the fourth and fifth centuries than from the third. Again, we do not know why, but it might also respond to editing criteria,

<sup>19</sup> STÖKL, *Canonization*, 214.

<sup>20</sup> These figures are taken from NONGBRI, *God's Library*, 273-280 (up to 2016) and updated to 2020. They refer to rolls and codices of Christian content that we know for sure that come from Oxyrhynchus. Sheets or other type of documents are not considered.

<sup>21</sup> The 34 remaining witnesses correspond to patristic works, acts of martyrdoms, collections of testimony texts, miscellaneous works, liturgical documents of various kinds, and a Christian codex of Philo.

as there are still numerous unpublished biblical papyri from this city. The Egypt Exploration Society, owner of the Oxyrhynchus papyrus collection, reported on March 7, 2019 that at least ca. 20 New Testament papyri, ca. 10 patristic texts and more than 80 Old Testament and related literature texts remain to be published (of these 80, five have been published since the report).<sup>22</sup>

But, if we confine ourselves to the current data, the distribution for centuries of the witnesses for various books found in Oxyrhynchus is comparable to that offered by Stökl:

<i>Century</i>	II	III	IV	V	VI	VI-VII	<i>Total</i>
“Canonical”	3.5	35.5	27.5	27.5	10.0	0.5	97
“Deuterocanonical”	1.0	5.5	5.0	0.5	1.0		13
“Apocryphal”	1.0	6.0	8.0	3.0	1.0		19
<i>Total</i>	5.5	47.0	40.5	23.5	12.0	0.5	129

More importantly, the ratio of “non-canonical” books, that is, the number of witnesses of this type for 100 “canonical” papyri, is also analogous to that of Stökl, although in Oxyrhynchus the ratio of “apocryphal” books is somewhat higher, especially in the fourth century, and that of “deuterocanonical” is significantly lower in the fifth century.<sup>23</sup>

<i>Century</i>	II	III	IV	V
	Oxy. / Stökl	Oxy. / Stökl	Oxy. / Stökl	Oxy. / Stökl
“Deuterocanonical”	28.5 / 25.0	15.4 / 13.1	18.2 / 20.6	2.5 / 10.6
“Apocryphal”	28.5 / 25.5	16.9 / 13.1	29.1 / 20.6	15.0 / 10.6

All these figures show that, regardless of the reasons that could have led to a greater presence of one type of book than another, the writings that would later enter the canon were probably more read and more popular than those that would remain outside.

## II. FORMAL FEATURES

In addition to the numerical comparison, it is also possible to make an assessment of some of the formal features that seem to characterize the books that would

<sup>22</sup> EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY, *Unpublished Christian Papyri from Oxyrhynchus: Some Numbers*: <https://www.ees.ac.uk/news/unpublished-ees-biblical-papyri> (last view January 2021).

<sup>23</sup> C.E. HILL, *A Four-Gospel Canon the Second Century? Artifact and Arti-fiction*, «Early Christianity» 4 (2013) 310-334, esp. 316-319, shows the same tendency regarding the number of extant gospel manuscripts.

become “canonical” versus those that would become “apocryphal”. The most significant is the use of the codex instead of the roll, the standard format of literary works at the time. The codex is surprisingly uniform for the “canonical” books, while variable for the “non-canonical”.<sup>24</sup> An example of this variability is the *Gospel of Thomas*, of which we have an extant witness preserved in codex format (P.Oxy. I 1), another in a roll (P.Oxy. IV 654) and yet another written on the back of a used roll (P.Oxy. IV 655), reflecting perhaps—if it is assumed that the codex format points toward a nascent scriptural status—that the sample in the codex might have been used as scripture by some, while the other copies were for private use.<sup>25</sup> The same can be said of the *Shepherd of Hermas* (seven codices vs. four rolls).<sup>26</sup> Of other “non-canonical” works there are examples in both formats: P. Egerton and various Gospel fragments are codices, while the *Gospel of Mary* (P. Oxy. L 3525) is a roll.

Together with the codex type, there are other features (size, uniformity in the use of *nomina sacra*, reading aids or punctuation) present in early Christian books that may also point to public usage and, consequently, perhaps to a presumed normative character.<sup>27</sup> This is what Scott Charlesworth argues when he compares the formal characteristics of the earliest witnesses of the “canonical” gospels with those of the “non-canonical” (*Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of*

<sup>24</sup> The literature on the topic is very extensive. For some recent studies, see J. CHAPA, *Early Christian Book Production and the Concept of Canon*, in T. NICKLAS, J. SCHRÖTER (eds.), *Authoritative Writings in Early Judaism and Early Christianity. Their Origin, Collection, and Meaning*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2020, 271-288, esp. 273 n. 7, with more bibliographic references. For specific studies, see M. WALLRAFF, *Kodex und Kanon: Das Buch im frühen Christentum* (Hans-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 12), De Gruyter, Berlin - Boston 2013; H.R. SEELIGER, *Buchrolle, Codex, Kanon. Sachhistorische und ikonographische Aspekte und Zusammenhänge*, in E.-M. BECKER, S. SCHOLZ (eds.), *Kanon in Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion. Kanonisierungsprozesse religiöser Texte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Ein Handbuch*, De Gruyter, Berlin - Boston 2012, 547-576.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. J. CHAPA, *Textual Transmission of ‘Canonical’ and ‘Apocryphal’ Writings within the Development of the New Testament Canon: Limits and Possibilities*, «Early Christianity» 7 (2016) 113-133, esp. 121. See also A.-M. LUIJENDIJK, *Reading the Gospel of Thomas in the Third Century: Three Oxyrhynchus Papyri and Origen’s Homilies*, in CLIVAZ, ZUMSTEIN (eds.), *Reading New Testament Papyri in Context*, 257. For the use of this work, see the remarks by SCHRÖTER, *The Use*, 138-145.

<sup>26</sup> M. CHOAT, R. YUEN-COLLINGRIDGE, *The Egyptian Hermas: The Shepherd in Egypt before Constantine*, in T.J. KRAUS, T. NICKLAS (eds.), *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach* (TENTS 5), Brill, Leiden 2010, 194-195.

<sup>27</sup> CHAPA, *Textual Transmission*, 123-125. Some of these feature are also mentioned by HILL, *A Four-gospel Canon*, 323-230; M.J. KRUGER, *Manuscripts, Scribes, and Book Production within Early Christianity*, in S. E. PORTER, A. W. PITTS (eds.), *Christian Origins and Graeco-Roman Culture* (TENTS 9) Leiden, Brill 2013, 15-40, esp. 18-27 and J. SCHRÖTER, *Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels within the Development of the New Testament Canon*, «Early Christianity» 7 (2016) 44-45.



*Mary* and the unidentified gospel fragments, P.Egerton, PSI 1200 bis; P.Dura 10; P.Vindob.G. 2325; P.Oxy. II 210; P.Mert. II 51; P.Oxy. X 1224 and P.Oxy. LXXVI 5072). In his view, the lack of these characteristics in the latter group show that they were copies produced for private consumption, similar to that of other literary works of the time, and not for liturgical use. This would explain why these writings had a lesser impact than the “canonical” ones, as they were understood as exegetical or homiletical works and not as gospels.<sup>28</sup> This is certainly possible, but the importance of these characteristics should not be exaggerated, for it is very difficult to establish the difference between public and private usage.<sup>29</sup>

### III. TEXTUAL STABILITY

But along with these features, Charlesworth also confronts the textual stability of future canonical texts with that of the writings that did not enter the canon. He looks especially at the text of the “canonical” gospels preserved on papyrus and concludes that, out of the twenty papyri and one parchment studied containing overlapping texts—as these were more suitable for comparison—, only P106 and 0171 (in his opinion, both copied for private use in an uncontrolled environment) show a “very free” text;<sup>30</sup> four of them (P1, P37, P45 and P69, all of them copied for private use too) present a “free” text; and the rest of the manuscripts have a “strict” or “normal” text, which would show that the transmission was accurate and only modified in small details according to the particular approach of the scribe.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Martin Heide has compared the textual stability of future canonical books with that of the “non-canonical” writings. Carrying out a quantitative analysis of the existing variations in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, of which we have a good number of copies of

<sup>28</sup> S.D. CHARLESWORTH, *Early Christian Gospels: Their Production and Transmission* (Papyrologica Florentina XLVII) Edizioni Gonnelli, Firenze 2016, esp. 121-154.

<sup>29</sup> See remarks on Charlesworth’s views by D. BATOVICI, *Reading Aids in Early Christian Papyri*, in B.A. ANDERSON (ed.), *From Scrolls to Scrolling, Sacred Texts, Materiality, and Dynamic Media Cultures*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2020, 35-50, esp. 40-43, who rightly points out the difficulties to establish what may have been destined to a public use and what to a private one.

<sup>30</sup> He follows the Alands’ characterizations for the textual quality of the earliest New Testament manuscripts of “very free”, “free”, “normal” and “strict”.

<sup>31</sup> CHARLESWORTH, *Early Christian Gospels*, 210. For Charlesworth these results would refute the views defending that the earliest textual transmission of the New Testament was characterized by its high fluidity. Note, however, the Aland categories are problematic. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Alands on the Classification of New Testament Manuscripts*, «Biblica» 70 (1989) 377-388. Whatever the product of a “controlled” environment is presumed to be, the resulting text—in part at least—is imagined to resemble the fourth century codices which are the basis of our modern reconstructed texts.

an early date,<sup>32</sup> Heide maintains that *Hermas* presents a lower textual stability than that shown by P<sub>45</sub>—the New Testament manuscript that has the lower value of textual stability when measured against codex Sinaiticus or Vaticanus.<sup>33</sup> According to Heide’s method, the average textual stability of the New Testament text (of the words in the passages taken as examples) is 92.6%, which for individual manuscripts ranges from 87.1% to 99.7%. But that of P<sub>45</sub>, when measured against codex Sinaiticus, is at the bottom of the scale and shows a textual stability of 88.8% (89.3% when measured against codex Vaticanus). In the case of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Heide observes that the average stability is 86% between the third and fifteenth centuries and states: “Average values of 86 percent do not even reach the worst value of the New Testament text, as represented by P<sub>45</sub>”.<sup>34</sup> From his analysis, he argues that, while the textual transmission of the New Testament was subject to greater scrutiny, that of *Hermas*—which occurred parallel to that of the New Testament—was neglected, especially in the early period. His conclusion is that theological interests and piety destabilized the text of *Hermas* and the text of the other books that did not enter the canon much more than the text of the “canonical” gospels, revealing therefore a different attitude towards the different type of writings.<sup>35</sup> Again, these statements are plausible, but it must also be said that the divergence that Heide observes in *Hermas*, although it is inferior to that of P<sub>45</sub>, does not appear to be particularly significant.

But that said and even assuming that the books that eventually did not become part of the canon were copied accurately on the whole, the extant evidence suggests that these were not transmitted and translated into other languages with the same care as the “canonical” books. Unfortunately, few early versions of Greek “deuterocanonical” or “apocryphal” writings have been preserved. For instance, in the case of *Hermas*, although it was probably translated into Latin as early as the second century, the earliest extant manuscripts in this language come from the eighth century. Even so, and despite the complex textual history of this work,

<sup>32</sup> For the earliest witnesses of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, see CHOAT, YUEN-COLLINGRIDGE, *The Egyptian Hermas*, 205-211; D. BATOVICI, *A New Hermas Papyrus Fragment in Paris*, «Archiv für Papyrusforschung» 62 (2016) 20-36; *Two Notes on Papyri of the Shepherd of Hermas*, «Archiv für Papyrusforschung» 62 (2016) 384-395.

<sup>33</sup> K.M. HEIDE, *Assessing the Stability of the Transmitted Texts of the New Testament and the Shepherd of Hermas*, in R.B. STEWART (ed.), *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace in Dialogue*, Fortress, Minneapolis 2011, 111-145.

<sup>34</sup> HEIDE, *Assessing*, 146. When he compares *Hermas* with the entire New Testament, concludes that the text of *Hermas* is less stable (with a stability that ranges from 83.1 to 87.9%) than that of the New Testament (that ranges from 92.6 to 96.2%).

<sup>35</sup> HEIDE, *Assessing*, 136-138. However, Heide’s conclusions on the canonicity of *Hermas* are criticised by D. BATOVICI, *The Shepherd of Hermas in Recent Scholarship on the Canon: A Review Article*, «Annali di Storia dell’Egesi» 34 (2017) 94-95.

it seems that at times the Latin translators carried out their task quite freely.<sup>36</sup> The same approach can be perceived in the Coptic versions (a Sahidic translation of *Hermas* was made in the fourth century and an Achmimic translation between the third and fourth centuries), of which some early fragments, some of them coming probably from the fourth century, are preserved.<sup>37</sup> Although the Coptic translation is considered to be more valuable than the Ethiopian version, it is also quite close to the latter, which is generally thought to be very free.<sup>38</sup> To this tendency of translating the text rather freely can be added the problem concerning the unity of *Hermas*. This would also be a sign of a less uniform and more problematic transmission of this work than that of most of the “canonical” books.

The differences between the Greek and Coptic text of the *Gospel of Thomas* also point in the same direction. If it was ever an authoritative book for a certain group of Christians, it does not seem to be transmitted as carefully as the books that would be later part of the New Testament. Simon Gathercole, who argues that the Greek fragments and the Coptic version of *Thomas* witness to the same work and not to two different recensions, points out that, even if the differences between them should not be exaggerated, they «exceed the “standard deviation” that one generally sees in the transmission and translation of the text of the New Testament».<sup>39</sup> The same could be said in relation to the Greek and Coptic texts of the *Gospel of Mary*<sup>40</sup> or the Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Peter*,<sup>41</sup> although,

<sup>36</sup> C. TORNAU, P. CECCONI (eds.), *The Shepherd of Hermas in Latin: Critical Edition of the Oldest Translation Vulgata*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2014, 11.

<sup>37</sup> See L.Th. LEFORT, *Les Pères apostoliques en copte* (CSCO, 135, Scriptorum coptici, 17), L. Durbecq, Louvain 1952; D. BATOVICI, *Some Observations on the Coptic Reception of the Shepherd*, «Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin» 3 (2017) 81-96; P. CECCONI, *1200 Years of Materialities and Editions of a Forbidden Text*, in C. RITTER-SCHMALZ, R. SCHWITTER (eds.), *Ancient Texts and Their Materiality: Presence, Media Semantics, and Literary Reflection in Daily Life*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2019, 309-330.

<sup>38</sup> M. WHITTAKER, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (GCS, Die apostolischen Väter 1), Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1956, xvii.

<sup>39</sup> S.J. GATHERCOLE, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary* (TENTS 11), Brill, Leiden 2014, 15. See also T. RICCHIUTI, *Tracking Thomas: A Text-Critical Look at the Transmission of the Gospel of Thomas*, in D.B. WALLACE (ed.), *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic and Apocryphal Evidence* (Text and Canon of the New Testament), Kregel, Grand Rapids 2011, 189-228.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, C. TUCKETT, *The Gospel of Mary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 119-133 and K.L. KING, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa 2003, 13-18, where the author presents the Greek and Coptic translations in parallel columns.

<sup>41</sup> The existing discussion whether the papyrus fragment P.Oxy. XLI 2949 can be attributed to this gospel speaks by itself. It seems that is similar to the narrative section of the Akhmim

again, the witnesses are too fragmentary to establish a good comparison, especially in the case of the *Gospel of Peter*.

#### IV. COLLECTIONS OF “SCRIPTURAL” BOOKS

Another element that points to a diverse use of “canonical” and “apocryphal” material is attested by the codices containing more than one writing of a scriptural nature. In this respect, an article by Michael Dormandy on the combination of biblical books offers some interesting insights.<sup>42</sup> Through a careful and cautious analysis, Dormandy classifies the manuscripts by gathering more than one work according to the degree of certainty that can be attained and shows that the manuscripts of which we are sure contained several writings only attest works which are today considered canonical. There are no witnesses of gospel collections with other “non-canonical” writings (e.g. a hypothetical *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *Thomas*), nor anything that might resemble an alternative Bible.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, other gospels existed, but the fact is that there are no extant manuscripts revealing a collection of gospels other than the “canonical”. For Dormandy this evidence confirms that the “non-canonical” gospels did not have the same status or were interchangeable with the “canonical” gospel and that the bibliographic practice of combining some writings and not others was not the consequence of explicit statements on the contents of the canon—since, in his opinion, they would hardly have had much influence so quickly—, but previous to those statements.<sup>44</sup> In other words, he thinks that those who copied the books did not have to receive instruc-

manuscript, but the differences are greater than the similarities. Cfr. P. FOSTER, *The Gospel of Peter. Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (TENTS 4), Brill, Leiden 2010, 58-68, 89-91.

<sup>42</sup> DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 1-39. The author frames his work within the canon discussion: «[D]id the early Christians believe certain works were canonical because they were normally part of the same bibliographic unit, or did they regularly include them in the same bibliographic unit because they considered them canonical?» (p. 3). For previous studies on multi multiple-unit codices, see CHAPA, *Early Christian*, 273-276.

<sup>43</sup> But we do find later codices in which “canonical” and “non-canonical” (not necessarily “apocryphal”) works occur together. See, for example, in the case of Revelation, J. SCHMID, *Studies in the History of the Greek Text of the Apocalypse. The Ancient Stems* [trans. and ed. by J. HERNÁNDEZ JR, G. V. ALLEN, D. MÜLLER (Text-critical studies 11)], Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018, 34-37.

<sup>44</sup> DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 22-23. The same is applied to the letters. However, given the fragmentary condition of the extant witnesses, we do not know if these were part of a collection of letters. Cfr. DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 22. The case of the Bodmer Miscellaneous, containing the letters of Peter and Jude together with some other writings is exceptional and does not reflect a gathering of works of normative status. See also NONGBRI, *God’s Library*, 170-171, 211; IDEM, *The Construction of P. Bodmer VIII and the Bodmer ‘Composite’ or ‘Miscellaneous’ Codex*, «Novum Testamentum» 58 (2016) 394-410; IDEM, *Recent Progress in Understanding the Construction of the Bodmer ‘Miscellaneous’ or ‘Composite’ Codex*, «Adamantius» 21 (2015) 172. Cfr. also

tions from ecclesiastical superiors about what was “canonical”, because, at the time these collections were produced, Christians already perceived in some books particular qualities that we consider “canonical”, before explicit statements about the canon were made.<sup>45</sup> As in the preceding cases, these claims are plausible, but the evidence is limited and Dormandy does not press it too far. He also mentions that we have a high number of codices containing probably only a single work, being likely that, at least initially, the codices with a collection of four “canonical” gospels were rare. This evidence challenges the view of a closed canon, as if the four-gospel codices were the normal format for New Testament manuscripts.<sup>46</sup>

#### V. SCRIPTURE CITATIONS ON AMULETS

Analogous to what has been seen so far, that is, the existence of some indications suggesting a greater relevance of the writings that would enter the canon compared to those that would remain outside it, is the case of the use of Scripture in Christian amulets found in Egypt. Fortunately, we have now a much better knowledge of this type of document thanks to the catalogue produced by Theodore de Bruyn and Jitse Dijkstra,<sup>47</sup> and the studies of Brice Jones<sup>48</sup> and Theodore de Bruyn.<sup>49</sup> As is well known, a good number of amulets contain biblical citations. These appear in three main ways: by using the title or incipit of some books;

T. WASSERMAN, *Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex*, «New Testament Studies» 51 (2005) 137-154.

<sup>45</sup> DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> DORMANDY, *How the Books*, 23-24. See also in this respect the remarks by J. D. MEADE, *Myths about Canon. What the Codex Can and Can't Tell us*, E. HIXSON, P. J. GURRY (eds.), *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2019, 253-277. On gospel codices see also P. M. HEAD, *Graham Stanton and the Four-Gospel Codex: Reconsidering the Manuscript Evidence*, in D.M. GURTNER, J. WILLITS, R.A. BURRIDGE (eds.), *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton* (LNTS 435), T&T Clark, London 2011, 93-101, esp. 100.

<sup>47</sup> T.S. DE BRUYN, J.H.J. DIJKSTRA, *Greek Amulets and Formularies Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets*, «Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists» 48 (2011) 163-216.

<sup>48</sup> B.C. JONES, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London 2016.

<sup>49</sup> T.S. DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets Christian: Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017; IDEM, *Christian Apocryphal and Canonical Narratives in Greek Papyrus Amulets in Late Antiquity*, in P. PIOVANELLI, T. BURKE (eds.), *Rediscovering the Apocryphal Continent: New Perspectives on Early Christian and Late Antique Apocryphal Texts and Traditions*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, 153-174; IDEM, *Appeals to Jesus as the One “Who Heals Every Illness and Every Infirmity” (Matt 4: 23, 9: 35) in Amulets in Late Antiquity*, in L. DITOMMASO, L. TURCESCU (eds.), *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, Brill, Leiden 2008, 65-81. See also D. FRANKFURTER, *Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of*

in the form of quotations, sometimes modified; and in the form of *historiolae* that tell or evoke some account related to the activity of Jesus.<sup>50</sup> It should be noticed, however, that the existing amulets attesting to these quotations are rather late (from the fourth century onwards) and that the repertoire of passages they present is fairly limited. In practice, quotations are reduced to the beginning of the four “canonical” gospels, to Psalm 90 (LXX) and to Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (although the number of other less frequent biblical citations is not insignificant).<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the references in amulets to narratives that recall the miracles that Jesus performed, being especially popular the Matthean summary of the ministry of Jesus (Matth. 4,23-24), are also taken from the “canonical” gospels.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, texts quoted from “apocryphal” writings are very rare and only occur in late amulets (the majority belonging to the fifth-seventh century). Of the writings traditionally considered “apocryphal”, the most popular is the correspondence—or part of it—between Abgar and Jesus. This story, which was used with apotropaic purpose, is attested in numerous amulets, both in Greek and Coptic, and in a variety of material support (papyrus, parchment, pieces of clay and stone).<sup>53</sup> The rest of the “apocryphal” texts quoted in this type of documents are practically reduced to a sixth century (or later) dialogue between Nathanael and Jesus (P.Berol. 11710) and a saying of Jesus attested in the *Gospel of Thomas* 1-7 (cf. P.Oxy. IV. 654, 27-31), which is written on a narrow piece of linen with an apotropaic function, and a few examples of amulets used for healing purposes, in which allusions to narratives taken from the “canonical” gospels are mixed with references to some other unknown narratives.<sup>54</sup>

*the Magical Historiola in Ritual Spells*, in M.W. MEYER, P.A. MIRECKI (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 129), Brill, Leiden 1995, 457-476.

<sup>50</sup> DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets*, 141-183.

<sup>52</sup> T.S. DE BRUYN, *Appeals*, 65-81; IDEM., *Christian Apocryphal*, 160-161. This does not mean that these amulets might not present also magical elements. I am only referring here to the use of writings that in the early centuries of Christianity might have been thought to be “Scriptural” by some.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. P.Oxy. LXV 4469, late fifth century; P.Cair.Cat. 10736 + Bodl. Ms. gr. Th. B. 1 (P), sixth or seventh century; etc. Cfr. DE BRUYN, *Christian Apocryphal*, 159-160; IDEM., *Making Amulets*, 153-157.

<sup>54</sup> DE BRUYN, *Christian Apocryphal*, 156-158; SCHRÖTER, *The Use*, 145. The text of the *Gospel of Thomas* was published by H.-C. PUECH, *Un logion de Jésus sur bandelette funéraire*, «Bulletin de la société Ernest Renan, n.s.» 3 (1955) 126-129; see also LUIJENDIJK, *Reading the Gospel of Thomas*, 241-267. The “biblical oracles” or *Hermeneiai*, that is, manuscripts with biblical passages followed by brief explanations that were useful for specific situations or with general instructions for daily life, might be somehow related to amulets. But they are mostly late and there is no evidence that were used with texts different from the “canonical” writings. See SCHRÖTER, *The Use*, 151-155. For the discussion on the usage of these texts, see B. C. JONES, *A Coptic Fragment of the Gospel of John with Hermeneiai* (P.CtYBR inv. 4641), «New Testament Studies» 60 (2014)

De Bruyn suggests that the citations and accounts present in amulets, which are focused on the power of Jesus, were largely borrowed from Christian preaching, especially from what was preached in the liturgical gatherings.<sup>55</sup> If this was the case, we might deduce from the extant amulets that the “apocryphal” texts had less incidence in popular religiosity because they were probably not used for public/liturgical reading. They were perhaps more appropriate for private use—and conceivably for this reason for a more select group of readers. Again, here, as in the previous discussed cases, we can only speak of an educated guess.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The background against which the question of the canon lies presents a variety of positions, sometimes irreconcilable. On the one hand, as Charles Hill summarizes, there is a quite widespread opinion maintaining that the gospels that would later be called “apocryphal” were equal to or more popular than those that would be “canonical”; that before Constantine there is no difference between manuscripts of the future New Testament books and those of the “apocryphal” writings; and, therefore, that words like “apocryphal”, “canonical”, “non-canonical” and “New Testament” are not only anachronistic, but also misleading or inappropriate for the early centuries of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, there is the view that defends a “canonicity conscience” in Christian scribes, at least since the end of the second century, which carried with it a different approach towards books that were considered normative and those that were not. According to this view, the canonical lists would only confirm what was already inherent to these books.<sup>57</sup>

The quick summary of the information provided by the earliest surviving Christian manuscripts might help to shed some light on the debate. Regarding which books might have been more popular, the quantitative evaluation speaks clearly in favour of the writings that would be “canonical”. Even if we know that there were numerous works that did not enter the canon, we have hardly received direct witnesses of them. On the contrary, the manuscripts of some of the future “canonical” books are quite numerous. At the same time, the way in which these early texts were copied and transmitted appears to point to a public

202-214, esp. 202-205 and K. W. WILKINSON, *Hermēneiai in Manuscripts of John’s Gospel: an Aid to Bibliomancy*, in A.-M. LUIJENDIJK, W. E. KLINGSHIRN (eds.), *My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and its Practitioners in Late Antiquity* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 188), Brill, Leiden 2018, 101-123.

<sup>55</sup> DE BRUYN, *Christian Apocryphal*, 170-171.

<sup>56</sup> HILL, *A Four-gospel Canon*, 312.

<sup>57</sup> This is the view of HILL, *A Four-gospel Canon*, and of many others, although with a wide range of opinions.

/ liturgical use of the “canonical” books, something which is not clear in the case of the “deuterocanonical” and “apocryphal” writings. Furthermore, while there is early evidence of codices with collections of “canonical” books, we have yet to uncover an early collection with a combination of both “canonical” and “apocryphal” works. Finally, if it is true that some “apocryphal” *historiolae* were used in amulets, it seems that the majority of the earliest extant witnesses of these documents show that the “canonical” citations were more popular.

These notes do not change the picture that we already knew from other sources. But what they suggest is that the writings that circulated in Christian communities in the second and third centuries and eventually did not enter the canon do not seem to have received the same acceptance as that received by the “canonicals” writings. Everything points to a greater popularity of the latter group in such a way that it is unlikely that those who later had to compile the lists of books which were to be accepted, contested, and rejected as normative for Christians had to go against the trend of what was more popular in their communities. The majority of the books that entered the canon gives the impression that they were those most widely used. However, having said this, a question arises naturally: Why were these books more read than others? We can only speculate on this, but perhaps Trobisch is partially correct when he proposes a canon that is based on the possibility of including in a codex the books the editors attributed to the figures of Paul, Jesus, and the Jerusalem church. But, yet again, although the names of these figures must certainly have had an influence in the process of selection, why precisely these authors and not others like, for example, Thomas? To answer this question there is no alternative but to resort to a criterion difficult to prove but certainly fundamental. This criterion is the rule of faith. As Schröter rightly states after having explained what the “canon of faith” means, «[t]he early church is [...] founded not merely on a collection of binding writings but rather this collection emerged in close connection with the apostolic tradition, which was viewed as foundational».<sup>58</sup> The rule of faith as a canon of early Christianity ensured the continuity to the apostolic witness of the initial period. «The rejection of other gospels, which subsequently became apocryphal, took place because they contradicted this “canon” and advocated, for example, a docetic or a Gnostic interpretation of the activity of Jesus».<sup>59</sup> Something similar could be said regarding the other writings that were not gospels. Even so, although the canonical declarations recognised some books as normative and excluded others, they did not impose a uniformity—as shown by the inclusion

<sup>58</sup> SCHRÖTER, *From Jesus*, 252. All of chapter *Jesus and the Canon. The Early Jesus Tradition in the Context of the Emergence of the New Testament Canon* (249-271) is interesting regarding this topic.

<sup>59</sup> SCHRÖTER, *From Jesus*, 271.



of four different gospels within the canon—, but a rich variety of views within the framework of the apostolic tradition of the initial period.

#### ABSTRACT

The number of the earliest extant Christian manuscripts of “scriptural” character and the study of their formal features offer some clues about the complex history of canon formation. In a negative sense they allow us to question the view that understands the Christian canon as a simple product of the fourth century—the product of a particular historical situation—and in a positive sense it suggests that the decisions about the makeup of the canon might be the result of a process of theological discernment on the basis of the particular use of some books.