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Scribal “Faithfulness” and the Text-Critical Imaginary

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In the summer of 2016 during a trip to Dublin, I wandered into the Chester Beatty for the first time. I walked up the stairs and, at the top, turned into the cool, dim light of a manuscript exhibit. I turned left, and left again, unexpectedly finding myself face to face with a page from Philippians 2 – the first papyrus of a New Testament text I ever saw in person. The kind man who was working in the exhibit noticed my awe and offered to bring me a stool. That page is part of Chester Beatty Biblical Papyrus II, also known as P⁴⁶ – a second- or third-century codex of Pauline epistles.

Less awed by the text of P⁴⁶ was Günther Zuntz, who claimed in *The Text of the Epistles* that,

as so often before, we must here be careful to distinguish between the very poor work of the scribe who penned it and the basic text, which he so poorly rendered. P⁴⁶ abounds with scribal blunders, omissions, and also additions. In some of them the scribe anticipated the errors of later copyists; in some other instances he shares an older error; but the vast majority are his own uncontested property. Once they have been discarded, there remains a text of outstanding (though not absolute) purity.¹

Zuntz’s statement presents two contrasting claims: first, that P⁴⁶ is an incredibly flawed manuscript betraying a high level of scribal carelessness; second, that it is *representative* of a text of outstanding and nearly “pure” quality.² Extant manuscripts often serve as witnesses not to their unique renderings of textual transmission and reception but rather in the creation of a scholarly construct of “the original text” – hence Zuntz’s claim that the actual preserved text can essentially be “discarded” in favour of the

“outstanding” text that underlies it. This tension between the text on the page and the text as it is constructed is a significant force propelling New Testament textual criticism. The text as it is constructed – whether an “original,” “archetype,” or “exemplar” – is not an extant artefact. But the manuscripts *do* exist as material representations of textual tradition.

In connection with the notion that an original text underlies the manuscript tradition, the rhetoric of “scribal faithfulness” is sometimes evoked as a criterion of textual quality. But the rhetoric of “faithfulness” is unclear with regard to what, precisely, is meant by the term. For one thing, the notion of “faithfulness” is value-laden, suggestive of a devotion to the text distinct from the professional duties of a scribe. As we will see, when referring to a scribe’s “faithfulness,” some scholars mean precision in copying from an exemplar, others mean accuracy in getting across the sense of the text, even if grammatical changes are made, and still others mean the scribe’s devotion to an historical original. Moreover, the rhetoric of faithfulness is fraught with theological notions inherited from the early roots of modern textual criticism of the New Testament, which was resolutely invested in reclaiming access to some kind of pure, authentic, original text.³ “The” original also presupposes a static canonical collection of only the most authentic and authoritative texts. The rhetoric of textual faithfulness is thus intertwined with the quest for the original and its reconstruction, and as a result it is also entangled with notions of canonical inevitability. These two scholarly constructs – the text-critical and the canonical – continue to be reflected in current scholarship on manuscripts such as P⁷² (the texts of Jude and 1 and 2 Peter, which were bound with the Bodmer Composite Codex; Jude: Geneva, BB, Pap. Bodmer VII [diktyon 74135]; 1–2 Peter: Vaticano, BAV, Pap. Bodmer VIII [diktyon 74133]) and the stichometric list copied into Codex Claromontanus (Paris, BnF, grec 0107 [diktyon 49673; GA 06]), among many others. As the discourse surrounding these manuscripts tends to show, extant artefacts are sometimes misrepresented in favour of a teleological history of the New Testament that would seem to suggest its inevitable and definitive form. However, rather than con-

1 Zuntz 1953, 212–13.

2 Citing this passage with full approval in 2004, Barbara Aland uses Zuntz’s statement to argue in favour of the quality of the text that supposedly underlies that of the beautiful but flawed P⁴⁶. Aland 2004, 116.

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3 See Lin 2016 and Peirano Garrison 2020, 86–109. On the problematic notion of a singular original, see Epp 1999, 245–81.

firming the stability and inevitability of the original text of the New Testament and its canonical authority, these manuscripts arguably attest to precisely the opposite: its persistent flexibility. Rather than undermining the New Testament collection, the fluidity exhibited by the manuscript tradition speaks to its ongoing use and adjustment. Textual vitality is an essential aspect of material tradition and transmission.

1 Scribal “faithfulness” in P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶

P⁴⁵ (Dublin, CBL, BP I [diktyon 75880]) and P⁴⁶ (Dublin, CBL, BP II [LDAB 3011]) are two manuscripts commonly maligned as crude or unreliable representations of their exemplars, especially in comparison to other early manuscripts such as P⁷⁵ (Geneva, BB, Pap. Bodmer XIV–XV [diktyon 74139]), which closely resembles the later text of Codex Vaticanus and for this reason has been deemed by some a “strict” and “reliable” copy.⁴ This evaluation of the quality of the texts found in manuscripts such as P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶ relative to other early papyri that resemble later, more complete manuscripts has tended to emphasise scribal faithfulness as a major factor in the reliable transmission of New Testament texts. However, it is one thing to lament the presence of grammatical errors or to note divergence from other manuscripts that preserve a different version of a text; it is another thing to attribute such variations to scribal figures using the language of “faithfulness.”

The methodology of Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland’s comparative work with the papyri, for example, is based on the question of fidelity, characterizing manuscripts as “free,” “normal,” “strict,” or “paraphrastic” in terms of their faithfulness to or deviation from a supposed “original text.”⁵ In *The Text of the New Testament* (1989) they assert that, “P⁴⁵, P⁴⁶, P⁶⁶, and a whole group of other manuscripts offer a ‘free’ text, i.e., a text dealing with the original text in a relatively free manner with no suggestion of a program of standardization.” They later clarified that,

the ‘free’ text represents only one of the varieties of the period. Beside it there is a substantial number of manuscripts representing a ‘normal,’ i.e., a relatively faithful tradition which departs from its exemplar only occasionally. . . and an equally substantial number of manuscripts representing a ‘strict’ text, which transmit the text of an exemplar with meticulous care (e.g., P⁷⁵) and depart from it only rarely.⁶

Citing Aland, Chapa pronounces P⁴⁵ to be “undisciplined,” with the scribe “favouring concision and brevity, preoccupied in communicating the significance of the text over and against an exact fidelity to the exemplar being copied.”⁷ Tichý claims that some of the more theological variation found in P⁴⁶ (or possibly its exemplar) “betrays a lack of understanding for the immense significance and personal importance Christ had for Paul” and exhibits “insufficient attention to the sequence of thought of the apostle Paul.”⁸ While Tichý does not here use the word “faithful,” the implication is that the scribe lacked sufficient devotion to the Pauline text and therefore a proper understanding of its theological weight. While Tichý considers P⁴⁶ to be “the authoritative, scriptural text,” and “respect to authority was expressed in the effort to make its pronouncements more accessible,” the “relatively free dealing with the text” by the scribe shows that this was done “unfortunately, by someone whose insight into the meaning of the text was rather limited.”⁹ A scribe who lacks textual “faithfulness,” for some, equates to a lack of theological devotion.

For Barbara Aland, errors are telling because they indicate what exemplars a copyist used, as well as how scribes “understood their responsibility.”¹⁰ Variation is thus not necessarily a result of incompetence, but the use of the term “error” still rings with a negative connotation. Aland notes, for example, that P⁴⁵ exhibits a “great number” of singular readings that “almost always make sense,” that is, the scribe made intentional (and perhaps unintentional) changes in favour of textual coherence. But this is not necessarily a good thing. Aland concludes that,

P⁴⁵ represents that kind of manuscript one might expect from an experienced transcriber of documents. On the whole a reliable copy has been produced. The conspicuous omissions and transpositions are not the work of a scholar carefully comparing exemplars, nor are they the result of intervention by a stylistic

⁴ See Aland / Aland 1989, 14, 57; but see also Nongbri 2016, 405–37.

⁵ Aland / Aland 1989a, 59, 64, 93–5. See also Epp 1995, 26 n.64. It should be acknowledged that the specific language of “faithfulness” occurs in the English translation of the Aland / Aland’s original *Der Text des Neuen Testaments*, also from 1989, and therefore this may also be an issue of translation. Still, there remains present a language of “care” and devotion with regard to the notion of an original text in danger of corruption at the hands of faulty and incompetent scribes. The original German reads that some manuscripts are representative of “einer relativ getreuen Überlieferung,” Aland / Aland 1989b, 69.

⁶ Aland / Aland 1989a, 59, 64; see also 69, referring to the “many-faceted” and “peculiar” nature of the early manuscripts in contrast to the “strict” text of P⁷⁵ or the “normal” text of P⁵².

⁷ Chapa 2012, 140–56, 150.

⁸ Tichý 2016, 241–51, 246–47.

⁹ Tichý 2016, 250.

¹⁰ Aland 2004, 109.

editor polishing the text. They are due rather to the standards of regularity and clarity imposed on scribes by their profession.¹¹

According to Aland, the error in P⁴⁵ is not haste or carelessness, but variation supposedly introduced into the text as a result of the “professional standards” of the scribe. In other words, changes or corrections made by copyists that result in a more intelligible text are not representative of scribal faithfulness, because faithfulness is not characterized by the transcription of the most coherent or grammatically correct text, but by a manuscript’s consistency with the “original text,” which is constructed on the basis of later, more complete manuscripts.¹²

P⁴⁶ does not, according to Aland, exhibit the same scribal standards as P⁴⁵. She states, “the quality of the copy is not comparable with the beautiful hand. The picture is marred by numerous errors – errors not only of orthography and badly written nomina sacra, but also numerous omissions due to a wandering eye (parablepsis) if not to pure carelessness. At times the writer did not understand the exemplar, and he produced a great number of nonsense readings.”¹³ Quoting in full agreement the same passage from Zuntz quoted above, she concludes that P⁴⁶ “represents a rough and inadequate copy of a good exemplar. What we have here is doubtless a copy, even though an inaccurate one, and not a text intentionally altered by the scribe. The scribe was not capable of it nor was it his task.”¹⁴ The figures below show pages from P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶. The “beautiful hand” of P⁴⁶ can be compared to the blockier, slightly slanted handwriting of P⁴⁵ (Figures 1 and 2).

Aland distinguishes between a “copy” and an “intentionally altered” text, presumably because the latter indicates active interpretation and engagement with the text. It is this interpretive function that she does not consider the scribe to have been capable of, and hence claims that the scribe produced an unintentionally bad copy, rather than an intentionally altered (that is, interpreted) text.¹⁵ In a later essay, Aland again compares the quality of the texts of P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶, this time over the question of whether the scribes, as readers and interpreters, intentionally altered their texts. She concludes that both were constrained by the standards of their profession to a narrow scope of creative freedom, but again affirms that the text of P⁴⁵ is “intelligent and generous,” while that of P⁴⁶ is

“littered with oversights, errors, carelessness.”¹⁶ It is too presumptuous to claim that the scribe of P⁴⁶ “wanted to make a careful copy, but was unable to cope with his text in terms of spelling or, what is more serious, the meaning of what he was copying,” concerning himself instead with calligraphic beauty, in contrast to the capable but more spartan handwriting of the scribe of P⁴⁵.¹⁷ While Aland does not use the language of faithfulness here, the underlying goal of accessing a text *other* than the one preserved remains, and so too does the accusation of scribal interference in this goal.

The view of scribal error held by Aland and Zuntz can be set in contrast to Metzger’s claim that scribes were perfectly capable of reproducing errors on purpose in order to remain in line with their exemplar. Regarding variants introduced into the manuscript tradition through scribal intention, Metzger comments that, “scribes who thought were more dangerous than those who wished merely to be faithful in copying what lay before them.” He offers the example of the scribe of P⁴⁶ who painstakingly copied exactly from their exemplar, for example in refraining from correcting a nonsensical reading in Gal. 2,12 that, according to Metzger “can scarcely be the form intended by the author.”¹⁸ This is an interesting divergence from claims of scribal faithfulness that suggest it represents fidelity to the idea of a perfect original, making use of the very

16 Aland 2019, 119: “Die Kopiermethode in P45 ist intelligent und großzügig: intelligent, weil der Schreiber den Sinn des zu Kopierenden schnell erfasst und trotz aller Omissionen, Transpositionen und Harmonisierungen im wesentlichen genau wiedergeben will, und großzügig, weil überflüssige Worte und umständliche Wendungen des Textes vereinfacht oder fallengelassen werden. Dieses Letztere könnte auf den bewussten Wunsch des Schreibers zurückgeführt werden, der Gemeinde, die ihn beauftragt hat, eine zuverlässige, aber auch verständliche, lesbare Kopie zur Verfügung zu stellen. . . Ganz anders verhält es sich mit P46, der anderen frühen Handschrift, die wie P66 in die Zeit um 200 datiert werden kann. Dieser früheste Pauluscodex, den wir besitzen, ist mit Versehen, Irrtümern, Sorglosigkeiten übersät, aber—und das ist zunächst das Entscheidende—der Text, der der Handschrift zugrunde liegt, ist gut. Das haben verschiedene Untersuchungen festgestellt; auch ein Blick in den Apparat einer modernen kritischen Ausgabe bestätigt es. Es ist also möglich, P46 trotz seiner vielen Fehler als guten Zeugen bei der Suche nach dem zu konstituierenden Text einzusetzen.”

17 “. . . steht eine Fülle von Fehlern, die zeigen, dass der Schreiber zwar eine sorgfältige Kopie herstellen wollte, aber seinem Text weder in der Orthographie gewachsen war, noch, was schwerwiegender ist, den Sinn dessen, was er kopierte, angemessen erfassen konnte. Ganz im Unterschied zum Kopisten von P45, der den Text seiner Vorlage rasch und eigenständig erfasste, ist dieser Schreiber offensichtlich mehr auf die kalligraphische Schönheit seiner Abschrift konzentriert—sie ist beträchtlich—als auf die Präzision des Geschriebenen.” Aland 2019, 121.

18 Metzger 2005, 195, 206.

¹¹ Aland 2004, 112.

¹² On the problematic circularity of reconstruction, see Ehrman 1989, 377–88; Petersen 2002, 33–65.

¹³ Aland 2004, 115.

¹⁴ Aland 2004, 116.

¹⁵ On singular readings and the question of scribal interpretation and the use of tradition, see Allen 2016, 859–80.

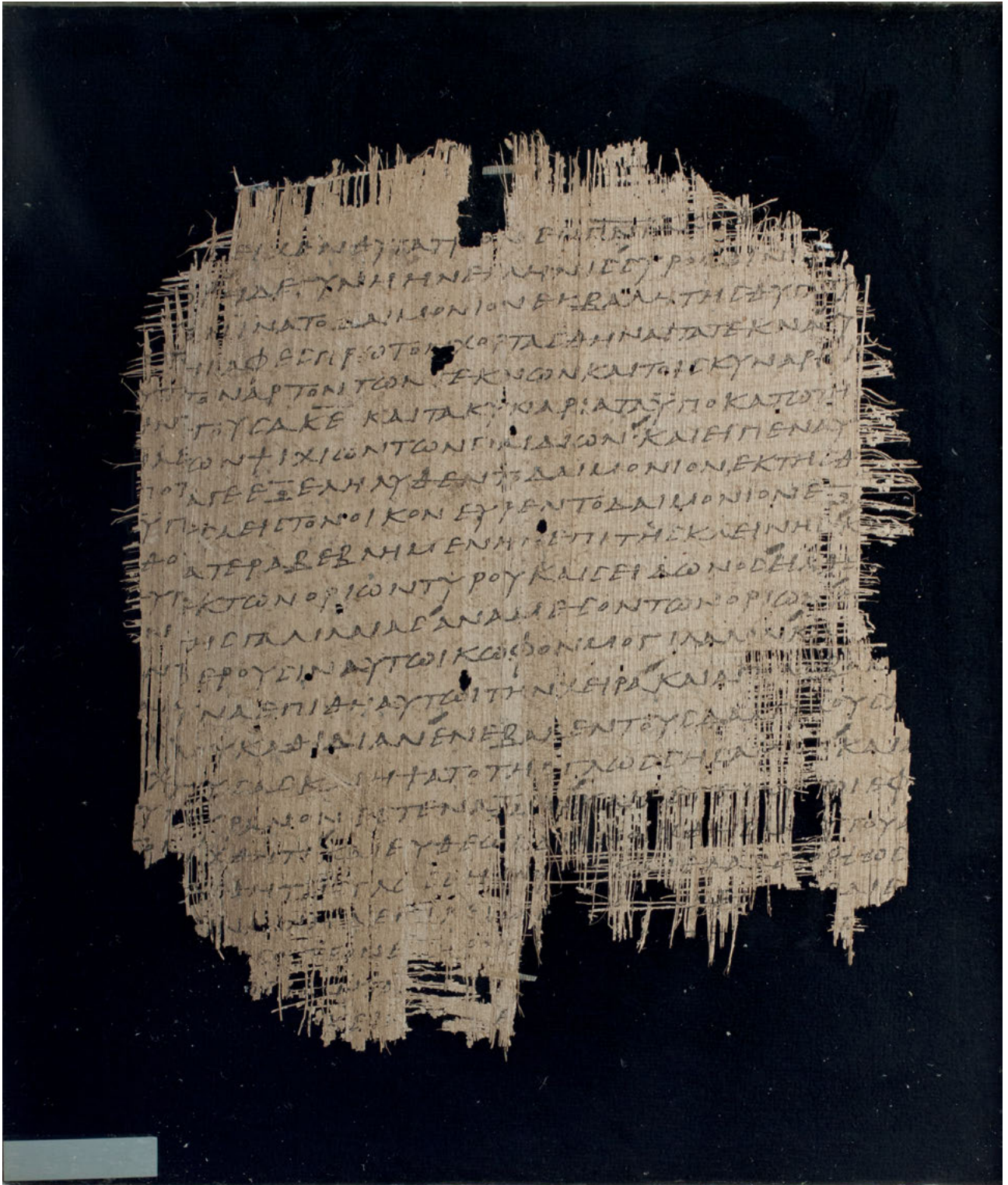


Figure 1: P45, BP I f. 6r (Mark 7:25–8:1).

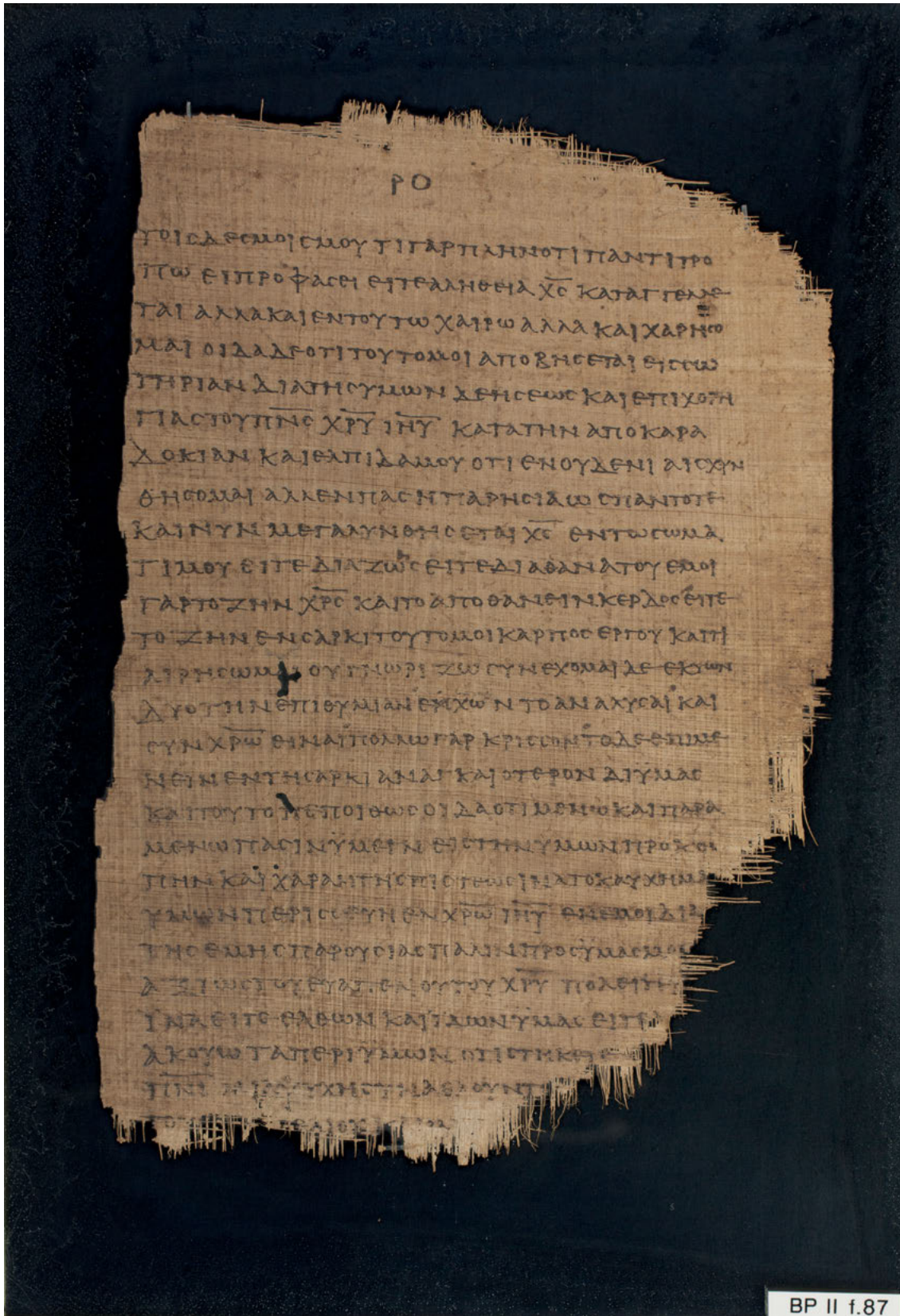


Figure 2: P45, BP II f. 87r (Phil 1:17–28)

same manuscript that others used to characterize a *lack* of scribal faithfulness. The manuscript to which Metzger appeals for his example, P⁴⁶, is the very same one used by Aland and Zuntz to argue that the scribe was careless and distracted by calligraphic beauty.

Another distinct approach to scribal “faithfulness” is provided by Larry Hurtado, who characterizes P⁴⁵ and Codex W as manuscripts that “show the efforts of scribes whose high regard for the biblical text was thoroughly compatible with a freedom to amend it in the interests of readability and religious edification.” He also describes the scribe of P⁷⁵ as “less careful than the scribe of P⁴⁵,” who was “more given to accidental errors but also far less given to intentional changes.”¹⁹ That is, for Hurtado a scribe’s high regard for the scriptures they copied does not inevitably equate to the exactness of their transcription. He characterizes scribal *freedom* to amend the text in favour of its more edifying reception as a form of faithfulness to scripture.

There are also examples of textual critics, going back to late antiquity, who do *not* use the language of faithfulness to describe scribal accuracy as pious devotion. In his *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei*, Origen acknowledges the variation present between different copies of the text, reasoning that these variants arose “either from the laziness of certain scribes or from the daring of some mistaken [scribes], or from the neglect of the correction of the scriptures, or from those who, in correcting in accordance with their own opinions, added or subtracted things” (*Comm. Matt.* 15.14). Origen is not pleased that scribes have introduced variation, but even the “perverse audacity,” as another translation renders it, of scribes who would do so intentionally appears to be an accusation more related to the function of a scribe than about their devotion to the scriptural text.²⁰ Origen goes on to explain that in cataloguing variants between a variety of Greek and Hebrew copies of the Old Testament in the Hexapla, he preserved the variation along with diacritic markers, using an obelus for passages that do not occur in the Hebrew version(s) and an asterisk for those that do not appear in the Greek version(s). Rather than harmonizing the copies according to the oldest one or to a presumed “original” text, Origen created a document that reflected the variability of its history of transmission.²¹

¹⁹ Hurtado 2004, 147.

²⁰ See Metzger 1963, 78–95.

²¹ For other examples of early church writers who discussed scribal variation, see Andrew of Caesarea on those who would dare to change the text of Revelation in Constantinou 2011, 241 n.14. Jerome also complains of Lucinus’s incompetent scribes, who wrote “not what they found but what they understood,” in *Ep.* 71.5, and see Williams 2006, 217–18.

Like Origen, the former director of the British Museum, Frederic Kenyon, in his introductions to the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri in the 1930s, preserves a sense of the plurality of the manuscript tradition. He writes that the text of P⁴⁵ is “very correct, and though without calligraphic pretensions, is the work of a competent scribe,” while the text of P⁴⁶ is, “in marked contrast to that of the Gospels and Acts MS. . . far more calligraphic in character, a rather large, free, and flowing hand with some pretensions to style and elegance.”²² Kenyon does not comment on the quality of the scribal hand in P⁴⁶ as it relates to the content, only claiming that the “character of the text may be gathered” from the tables of data he includes which detail its agreements and disagreements with “the principal MSS,” which are determined from Tischendorf’s apparatus.²³ He leaves it up to the reader to determine the text’s character, rather than making a judgment about the quality or ability of the scribe.

A more recent approach to scribal activity in these papyri is that of James Royse, who does not use the language of faithfulness with regard to either P⁴⁵ or P⁴⁶. He notes rather the “clear and careful” writing of P⁴⁵, even given its relatively high rate of singular readings reflective of what he considers to be intentional changes by the scribe.²⁴ Writing on the process of copying early Christian texts, Alan Mugridge describes varying levels of scribal competence more generally. He notes that the regularity of a scribe’s handwriting often distinguishes professional from non-professional hands, using the irregularity and unevenness of P⁴⁷, another Chester Beatty Biblical Papyrus, and P⁷², which I will discuss below, as examples of non-professional scribal effort.²⁵ Distinguishing trained, professional scribes from non-professional ones according to skilled versus unskilled hands, he concludes that “the vast majority of the Christian papyri were copied by trained scribes.”²⁶ But, while calligraphic regularity might suggest a certain level of scribal professionalism, it cannot determine scribal intention in the introduction of

²² As many have pointed out, the good hand does not correspond to a more coherent text, which has many spelling and grammar errors, nonsense readings, and apparent omissions; Kenyon 1933, ix; Kenyon 1934, ix.

²³ Kenyon 1934, ix–x.

²⁴ Royse 2007, 106, 358.

²⁵ Mugridge 2016, 20.

²⁶ Mugridge 2016, 147. He further notes that scribes may have been confused by the content and style of Christian texts and adjusted them to fit their conception of “literary” vs. “documentary” papyri, an uncertainty that would have cleared around the third century when more exemplars were circulating and more scribes were Christian. Again, though, this does not solve the question of “faithfulness.”

variation. Some scribes may have adhered closely to their exemplars and copied even misspellings and grammatical errors, while others altered them in favour of readability and style; both approaches are within the scope of scribal labour. The use, or not, of the rhetoric of fidelity to describe the quality of scribal activity is as variable as the texts it describes.

So, what *is* scribal faithfulness? Or, rather, what do text critics *mean* by “scribal faithfulness?” Aland and Aland assume that the corruption and correction of the text through the branching and growth of the manuscript tradition are both forms of scribal *unfaithfulness*, though in her later work Barbara Aland is also interested in the possibility of minimal alteration due to scribal professional standards; Zuntz believes it is possible to clear away all the blundering errors of the scribe of P⁴⁶ to reclaim the “outstanding” and nearly pure text underneath, by which he means its relation to an historical original; Metzger suggests that scribes could be “faithful” in the sense that they copied precisely from their exemplar without letting their own thoughts get in the way, while Hurtado does *not* equate accuracy with faithfulness. When we talk about scribal faithfulness, are we talking about adherence to professional scribal standards of basic grammatical, syntactical, and stylistic effectiveness that coherent texts should exhibit? Or the precision with which a scribe copies from an exemplar? Or the pious devotion to the idea of a flawless, unadulterated original text representing the intended words of an historical author? That an underlying text can, in fact, be accessed in a straightforward way cannot be taken for granted, as the variation in claims of scribal faithfulness regarding the same two manuscripts has shown. For some, P⁴⁶ attests to the scribal *unfaithfulness* of the high-quality text supposedly underlying this flawed copy; for others, this same manuscript provides evidence that scribes could be so “faithful” in their copying that they preserved even obvious errors.

2 *Fides* and scribal faithfulness

The rhetoric of *fides* is not a novelty of modern New Testament textual criticism. Another way to construe the language of scribal “faithfulness” is to consider it as an inheritance, like so many other aspects of New Testament criticism, of nineteenth-century scholarship. Faithfulness to the text and its transcription was conflated with faithfulness to scripture and its divine authority. A scribe’s precision in copying from their exemplar was thus not simply a matter of accuracy but one of piety when the original is

considered a divinely influenced work. “*Fides*,” says Irene Peirano Garrison in an essay on the shared roots of philology and theology,

is liberally deployed of the reliability of witnesses, the conscientiousness of scribes, and a scholar’s trust in a given family of texts, to name a few. Yet the construct of *Christiana Fides* inevitably colours these nineteenth-century usages, as the accuracy of the scribe easily fades into (and is therefore read as) a devotional act, and one’s ability to rely on a printed text acts as a catalyser of Faith.²⁷

The idea that the scribe would be devoted to the text and its *theological content* in their effort to transmit the best possible version assumes that such scribes are Christian. This is another aspect of scribal identity that cannot be taken for granted. Mugridge points, for example, to the claim that because many Christian texts contain *nomina sacra*, only Christians could have written them. But, “copyists would need only to copy the manuscript before them,” and thus it is not necessary to assume that the use of *nomina sacra* indicates that a scribe was a Christian.²⁸

A further snag in the question of scribal devotion is offered by Candida Moss, who has recently argued that ancient scribes and secretaries were often servile workers – even Mark, who is traditionally said to have penned the gospel attributed to him according to the teaching of Peter.²⁹ The “unpolished” quality to Mark’s gospel – one of the works included in P⁴⁵ – serves for Papias as evidence of its accuracy, rather than its corruption. Papias claims that Mark “did nothing wrong” in writing down things as he remembered them, though he did so with a lack of τῶς ἰσχυρῶς, or proper rhetorical, and possibly chronological, order.³⁰ “Mark’s literary deficiencies,” says Moss, “are leveraged by Papias and others as evidence for his accuracy in preserving Petrine oral teaching.”³¹ That Mark’s “deficiencies” were for Papias evidence of its historical accuracy complicates the question of scribal precision as a function of “faithfulness” to the text of scripture, making apparent another tension when it comes to ancient scribal labour: scribes can be credited with writing and preserving historical works attributed to higher-status apostolic figures *or*

²⁷ Peirano Garrison 2020, 95.

²⁸ Mugridge 2016, 151. It may be the case that more scribes were Christian after Constantine, particularly given the rise of monasticism and the sacred task of preserving and copying scripture, but Mugridge notes that even this would need to be taken into consideration for individual manuscripts.

²⁹ Moss 2021, 181–204; Moss forthcoming. See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.15.1–2 (citing Clement and Papias), 3.39.15 (citing Papias), 6.14.6–7 (citing Clement), 6.25.5 (citing Origen); cf. I Petr. 5,13.

³⁰ Papias via Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15, trans. Lake 1926, 297.

³¹ Moss 2021, 185–86, 196–98, 202.

blamed for their corruption through variation introduced either intentionally or unintentionally. Scribes who participated in the early production of Christian literature are often used to validate the (pseudonymous) authority of texts such as James, 1 Peter, or the Pastoral Epistles, a claim that relies on active scribal participation, not only their technical skill in taking dictation, since changes in tone or style are attributed to the scribe, rather than to the apostolic author.³² In contrast, as we have seen, textual critics blame scribes for introducing variation into the text of the New Testament, whether intentionally or not.³³ What is scribal faithfulness when scribes may have participated in the initial production of the historical text, or when a text's literary roughness was considered to be a mark of historical accuracy?

The rhetoric of scribal faithfulness also finds its roots in the quest for the original text. Peirano Garrison further asserts that “philology's quest for the original is perhaps the most transparent and notorious instance of overlap between the theological and the philological,” as seen in stemmatic methods of comparing and grouping manuscripts according to a presumed canon that transcends individual extant manuscripts.³⁴ The concern over variation as a corruption of an “original” is reflected in the tradition of attributing variant readings to accident,

³² See also Origen's note of the differing style of Pauline texts, especially Hebrews, in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.11–14. There are various ways of accounting for this in modern scholarship, including the participation of a secretarial hand, as in the case of 1 Peter, and a two-stage process in which the “authentic” words of an apostle are seen to be reflected in the later writing of a text attributed to them but written by another, as in the case of James. See Painter 2007, 75–98; Foster 2014, 24; Selwyn 1947, 9–17; Davids 1990, 6; Davids 2006, 128. See Moss forthcoming, n.27 and Ehrman 2013, 660–66 for examples from the Pauline corpus. See also the distinction between copyists and stenographers in Williams 2006, 218–19.

³³ As Moss puts it, “it is fair to say that academic conversation about secretaries and the New Testament has been potted and opportunistic,” not least in the use of secretaries to legitimize apostolic works as authentic, “only to dismiss them from their interpretation of the text,” forthcoming, 9–10.

³⁴ Peirano Garrison 2020, 94–5. Stemmatic or other genealogical methods might seek a true original—the words of Jesus or the words of the Apostles—or they may be after the archetype or initial text of a textual family that, while lost, is nevertheless considered to be more in reach through the comparison of shared errors and omissions. In either case, these methods are employed in the development of an exemplar based on the discerning efforts of scholarship; that is, the goal is a necessarily composite, and hypothetical, textual construct. For an overview of evaluating textual relationships since the birth of text types and the development of the CBGM, see Wasserman 2019, 333–61. And see Lin 2016, particularly 150–71, including her proposals for metaphors alternative to genealogical and arborescent ones (here p. 168–71).

grammatical or palaeographic error, problems with sight or hearing, and other passive forms of creating variance. “What a variant could not be,” asserts David Parker, “was theologically motivated.”³⁵ According to Parker, an emphasis on the Bible as a source of divine revelation without considering its material preservation leads to the assumption that the received text has a singular source – the historical evangelists and apostles – at the expense of the prolific manuscript tradition.³⁶ Moreover, the rhetoric of scribal faithfulness, determined by comparing extant manuscripts to a text-critical hypothetical exemplar constructed primarily from later and more complete manuscripts, can also be reflective, as Peirano Garrison points out, of underlying theological assumptions about the nature of the text. What Parker critiques as an overly linear sense of the development of orthodoxy finds expression in the text-critical investment in scribal faithfulness to a reconstructed original text. The notion of variation as corruption also contributes to the link between “scribal faithfulness” and the idea of a singular uncorrupted original. But editions and reconstructed texts are necessarily amalgamations. They are composite products and representations of existing manuscripts. This is the textual “imaginary” of New Testament text criticism – the construct of an original text against which all supposed copies can somehow be compared. And even this means different things according to different scholars.³⁷ The fluidity of the manuscript tradition means that the definition of what constitutes scripture and canon is always to some extent a moving target.

3 The canonical imaginary construct

The textual and canonical flexibility evident in the manuscript tradition can be contrasted with what Jennifer Knust has called the “Christian canonical imaginary,” a phenomenon in which textual collections are assumed to reflect a much later notion of a “canonical” collection than their material preservation and transmission actually suggest.³⁸ Knust analyses manuscripts found among the Dishna papers in Egypt that contain apparently mis-

³⁵ Parker 2009, 329.

³⁶ Parker 2009, 325.

³⁷ See e.g. the “Slight Shift in Goal” section of Wasserman and Gurry 2017, 11–3. On the relationship between the “initial text” and the “living text,” see Parker 2011, 13–21.

³⁸ Knust 2017, 99–118.

cellaneous, though often thematic, groupings of now-canonical and noncanonical literature, emphasizing that the Dishna miscellanies and their porous sense of “canonical” authority are not anomalous, but are characteristic of early Christian reading practices.³⁹

More than analogous, the text-critical and canonical imaginaries sustain one another. Like the text-critical imaginary, the canonical imaginary is a later construct that is then compared to earlier evidence. One of the Dishna miscellanies is the Bodmer Composite Codex, which contained the texts of 1 and 2 Peter and Jude that make up the so-called “P⁷²” (Jude: Geneva, BB, Pap. Bodmer VII [diktyon 74135]; 1–2 Peter: Vaticano, BAV, Pap. Bodmer VIII [diktyon 74133]).⁴⁰ Aland and Aland emphasise the importance of the Bodmer papyri, noting the “startling fact” that P⁷² is a “single collection of writings.”⁴¹ However, P⁷² is not a single collection of now-canonical writings. While it is the only “cluster” of Catholic Epistles prior to the pandects and some interesting elements are shared in common between 1 and 2 Peter and Jude,⁴² these three texts are not consecutive, the Petrine Epistles represent a separate layer of production,⁴³ and all three were bound to the Bodmer Composite Codex along with other texts like *3 Corinthians*, the oldest extant copy of the *Protevangeli-um of James*, and the 11th *Ode of Solomon*.⁴⁴ The same scribe likely copied 1 and 2 Peter and Jude, but also *3 Corinthians* and the 11th *Ode of Solomon*.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the

³⁹ Knust 2017, 102, 114.

⁴⁰ The texts of 1 and 2 Peter from P⁷² can be viewed at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Pap.Bodmer.VIII; the text of Jude from P⁷² can be viewed at https://manuscripts.csnm.org/manuscript/Group/GA_P72.

⁴¹ Aland and Aland 1989, 57: “Until their discovery it was thought on the basis of P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶ that the second/third century text was generally characterized by considerable irregularity.” They add this footnote: “no one had ever thought it possible, for example, that a complete text of the letter of Jude and the two letters of Peter would be found preserved in a papyrus of the third or fourth century,” n.9; 87, 93. Michael Dormandy 2018, 19 likewise argues that it “regards a work which is in modern terms canonical as the heart of the collection [of the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex].”

⁴² See Wasserman 2005, 137–54, esp. 147–48.

⁴³ Nongbri 2016, 394–410; Nongbri 2015, 171–72.

⁴⁴ The full contents of the codex are, in order: the *Nativity of Mary* (the oldest extant manuscript of the *Protevangeli-um of James*), *3 Corinthians*, the 11th *Ode of Solomon*, Jude, *Peri Pascha* (an Easter sermon of Melito of Sardis), a fragmented hymn, the *Apology of Phileas*, *Psalm 33* and *34* (LXX), and 1 and 2 Peter. Curiously, the Crosby-Schøyen Codex MS 193 also contains Melito’s *Peri Pascha*, along with II Mac. 5,27–7,41, the earliest known manuscript of 1 Peter (in Coptic), Jonah, and one unidentified text. See Knust 2017, 105–109; Jones 2011, 9–20; Horrell 2009, 502–22.

⁴⁵ Wasserman 2005, 140–44. Wasserman considers the likelihood that a single scribe copied P⁷² to be “the most significant connection” between the various production layers of the Bodmer Codex, a sig-

codex is better described as a “composite” rather than a miscellany, and there are multiple suggestions for a theme binding the texts together, including Easter, the body, and suffering.⁴⁶ Discourse on this manuscript shows that New Testament scholarship tends to neglect of the rest of the codex, a trend that isolates “P⁷²” while neglecting the material form and historical context of the Bodmer Composite Codex.⁴⁷

Part of the dismantled history of the Bodmer Composite Codex is that it was found among the Dishna Papers, which likely share a monastic provenance with the Nag Hammadi Codices.⁴⁸ In addition to presenting the most complete texts of Jude and the Petrine Epistles prior to the major uncials, the Bodmer Composite (or Miscellaneous) Codex offers evidence of the third- or fourth-century combination of texts that were both now-canonical and noncanonical. P⁷² is not indicative of an early and clear sub-collection of New Testament literature—it is part of a much broader ancient context and can only be perceived as “proto-canonical” in light of the canonical imaginary construct.⁴⁹

Another example of the imposition of the canonical imaginary can be found in literature on the stichometric list inserted into the sixth-century Codex Claromontanus (Paris, BnF, grec 0107 [diktyon 49673; GA 06]), a Greek and Latin bilingual manuscript containing Pauline letters.⁵⁰ The common understanding, originating with Tischendorf’s transcription of the codex in the nineteenth century, has been that the stichometry *should* list the familiar 27 works of the New Testament, but that scribal error is to blame for the accidental omission of Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Hebrews, and that a scribe clearly marked four now-noncanonical works (*Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Revelation of Peter*) as of secondary status through the use of obeli.⁵¹

nificance that is only apparent when one is working backwards from the knowledge of a later New Testament collection that includes Jude and 1 and 2 Peter (154). See also Royle 2007, 545–46.

⁴⁶ See Jones 2011, 9–20; Haines-Eitzen 2000, 103–104; Horrell 2009, 502–22, esp. 516–17. Contra Strickland 2017, 781–91, esp. 785; Strickland also argues for the proto-orthodox allure of P⁷², concluding that 1–2 Peter and Jude affirmed “the boundaries of orthodoxy within the NT’s Petrine tradition” for a supposed proto-orthodox community (p. 791).

⁴⁷ Wasserman 2005, 137–38.

⁴⁸ See Lundhaug 2018, 329–86; Lundhaug and Jennot 2015, 78–84.

⁴⁹ Knust 2017, 108, 102.

⁵⁰ For more on this stichometry and its history of interpretation, see Rodenbiker 2021, 240–53.

⁵¹ Robbins 1986, 233 claims that the stichometry, “given its careless omissions, apparently intends to set forth a 27-book ‘New Testament.’” Hahneman 1992, 141 claims that the scribe of the Claromontanus stichometry “drew a line before the last four entries,

Such an explanation of the list is an act of taming: this explanation tones down the canonical flexibility represented by the stichometry and reinforces the idea of the familiar canonical list, *even though this list is in fact quite different from that familiar list*.

But there is more. The obeli were added by a later hand than the one that transcribed the list, and Tischendorf acknowledges this in part in a small footnote, stating, “by these four line-enumerations for epist. Barnabas, Shepherd, Acts of Paul and Revelation of Peter obeli have been placed by a fairly recent hand.”⁵² He did not mention, however, that there are two other obeli, one alongside the more widely accepted works of *Judith* and “*ad petrum prima*” – another curious element, though the title likely refers to 1 Peter (see the end of the list in Figure 3).

Given that the list does not include four of the Pauline epistles and *does* include four other now-noncanonical works, the Claromontanus stichometry presents a 27-work list, but not the familiar canonical collection. The codex itself does contain the four Pauline letters that are missing from the list, so this might be considered a genuine error either by the scribe or his exemplar, but the four noncanonical texts are original to the list, where the obeli marking their secondary status are not. The traditional view has been that the original scribe is to blame for the errors in transcription, while this same or a different scribe is credited for marking (only) the noncanonical works as spurious, leading to the assumption that the list *intended* something other than what it presents. But the original list did not contain all the Pauline letters and *did* include *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Revelation of Peter*. Many factors must be taken for granted in order to arrive at the conclusion that

namely *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Revelation of Peter*,” without mention of the marks alongside 1 Peter (*ad Petrum prima*) or *Judith*. He is also incorrect about the final four texts: the Johannine Apocalypse and the Acts of the Apostles separate *Barnabas* from the other three noncanonical works. Metzger 1987, 230, 310 n.9 explains the mark alongside 1 Peter as a paragraphus, intended to signify the start of a new section and so to distinguish between the Pauline epistles and the titles that follow, while the other four marks are said to “identify works of doubtful or disputed canonicity.” See also Gallagher and Meade 2018, 184–86 and n.62; Porter and Pitts 2015, 26.

52 “His quattuor versibus de epist. Barnabae, pastore, actibus Pauli, revelatione Petri manu satis recenti praepositi sunt obeli,” Tischendorf 1852, 468–69, 589. The footnote numerals 6, 9, 10, and 11 correspond to the lines of the stichometry on which the four texts whose obelus Tischendorf acknowledges are transcribed. Meade 2019, 257 n.14 includes a note, credited to Hixson, acknowledging the secondary nature of the obeli, but does not mention that the same mark occurs alongside *Judith* and 1 Peter in the stichometry.

the stichometry actually *meant to* list the 27 books of the now-canonical New Testament, including scribal error and a break in convention with the rest of the stichometry in the marking of only the noncanonical works. The canonical imaginary looms large.

4 Conclusion: imagination and preservation

In a recent introduction to the *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism*, Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts define “traditional” textual criticism as a “concern to recover the original form of the text by means of applying rigorous text-critical methodology to the available manuscript tradition,” referring to other studies of textual transmission under the umbrella of a “sociohistorical model” of textual criticism and thus centring the traditional model as the norm.⁵³ They acknowledge that the “sociohistorical” model, exemplified by David Parker, has become valid for many, but the authors affirm that the central aim of text criticism must remain seeking access to “the original text of the NT documents.”⁵⁴ They include a chapter titled “Canon: The Domain of New Testament Textual Criticism,” which argues in favour of an early (second-century) canonical collection of Christian writings, emphasising the deep connection between the constructs of the canonical imaginary and the text-critical imaginary. One confirms the other.⁵⁵

As the variable uses of the language of scribal “faithfulness” in relation to a hypothetical original text and the canonical imaginaries of P⁷² and the Claromontanus stichometry illustrate, though, the matter is not so simple. It cannot be taken for granted that the Petrine letters and Jude, which make up “P⁷²,” are a proto-canonical cluster; rather, they are non-consecutive works bound in the same codex, which originated in an ancient monastic context. Likewise with the Claromontanus stichometry, whose history of interpretation has tended to obscure the ways in which this list highlights the flexibility of the New Testament canon beyond the fourth century, the canonical construct is read into ancient evidence.

The neat arc of the production of texts, their corruption and variation through copying, and their eventual recovery and rehabilitation by discerning modern critics relies on the assumption that this process can and does move from coherence to chaos and back again to coherence. In this model,

53 Porter and Pitts 2015, 1.

54 Porter and Pitts, 2015, 6.

55 Porter and Pitts, 2015, 17–20.

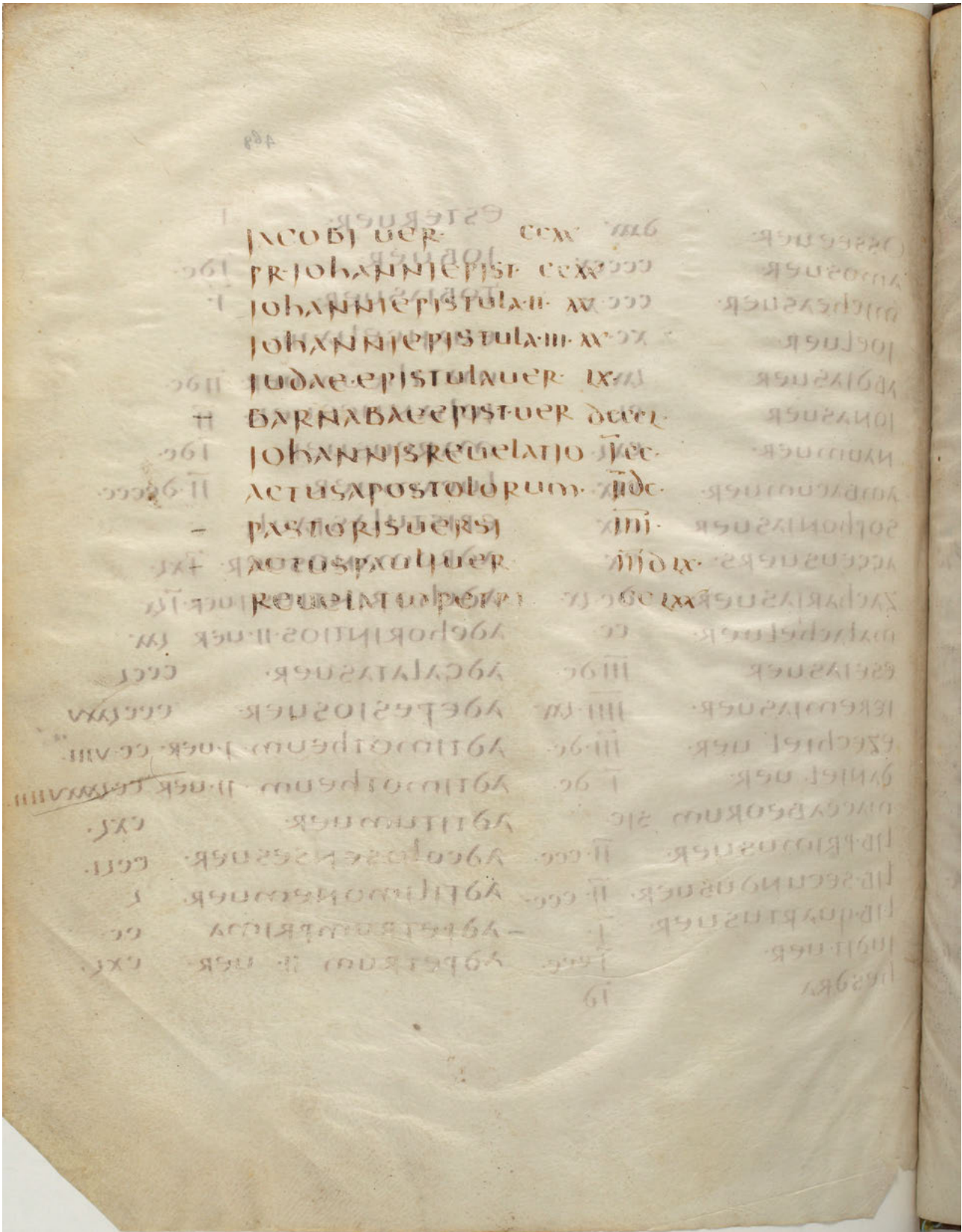


Figure 3: The Claromontanus stichometry spans GA 06, BnF Grec 107 f. 467v–468v; this is folio 468v, containing, in order, the titles and stichometric numbering for James, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, *Barnabas*, the Revelation of John, Acts, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Revelation of Peter*.

the “free” or “living” texts represented by the early papyri that are not consistent with “strict” or later, more complete witnesses of the fourth and fifth centuries are weeded out or neglected in favour of a linear trajectory of textual development, represented by both the text-critical imaginary and the canonical imaginary. But reconstructed texts like Nestle-Aland editions, for example, are an omnibus of hundreds of extant manuscripts, and will always be *representations* of the tradition, not the tradition itself. Editions are valuable tools for navigating a complex manuscript tradition, and hypotheses are a necessary part of the process of studying history and historical artefacts. But the usefulness of critical editions is limited to the research questions that stand behind their production. Instead of standing in for (or being perceived as) *the* authoritative version of a text – the text-critical imaginary construct – critical editions point readers to the complex and dynamic material history of the extant sources used to create them.⁵⁶ To determine a text’s level of scribal “faithfulness” or corruption based on a particular edition of the Nestle-Aland text or Tischendorf’s transcriptions or the *Textus Receptus* or otherwise is to do a disservice to the profound particularity and inherent fluidity of the manuscript tradition.

Textual variation cannot be taken for granted as a function of incompetence, carelessness, a lack of piety, or even as an act of piety (Hurtado). It can also be reflective of knowledge, proficiency, and tradition. The rhetoric of “faithfulness,” tied as it is to the hypothetical constructs of the text-critical and canonical imaginaries, is too murky to be useful and incongruous with material evidence. More neutral terms like “precision” or “accuracy” can be used in cases where this is what is meant with regard to the comparison between a scribe’s copy and their (often hypothetical) exemplar. Fluidity and fluctuation furthermore need not be considered major detractors from the “faithfulness” of manuscripts and their scribes, but can rather be acknowledged as part and parcel of the tradition of textual transmission.⁵⁷ The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri P⁴⁵ and P⁴⁶ are not fundamentally flawed, but rather represent unique instances of reception and reflect the fluidity endemic to manuscript traditions. Their peculiarities are therefore key to their analysis as unique documents, rather than a departure from some early Christian norm of supposedly more faithful scribal practice.

في هذه المقالة تستخدم الباحثة أوراق البردي من مجموعة تشيستر بيتي كطريقة لتحليل الكتابات العلمية المتخصصة واللغة المستخدمة فيها فيما يتعلق بمسألة أمانة الكتابة والنقل للنصوص الإنجيلية ومهمة الكتابة والنسخ في هذا المجال وخاصة فيما يتعلق بعملية نسخ العهد الجديد. تقول الباحثة أن المصطلحات التي تشير إلى مسألة “أمانة النقل” أو بالإنجليزية “scribal faithfulness” ما هي إلا وسيلة تخيلية الهدف منها الابتعاد عن الواقع الذي تشير إليه العديد من النصوص المحفوظة على أوراق البردية وهي الفكرة السائدة في معظم دراسات العهد الجديد. ولذلك تدعو الباحثة إلى النظر إلى مثل هذه المخطوطات، مثل مخطوطات برديات تشيستر بيتي، بعيداً عن إطار النص الأصلي أو استعادة نص النسخة الأصلية من الإنجيل وذلك على أساس أن مثل هذه النصوص تعطينا نظرة فريدة على عملية نقل ونسخ نصوص الكتاب المقدس بكل ما يتعلق بعملية النقل هذه من مهام يشترك فيها الكتابة أويقومون بها نيابة عن مجتمع المتدينين وذلك من أجل صياغة للعهد الجديد تناسب الظروف التاريخي الذي تشير إليه هذه البرديات.

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⁵⁶ See Cerquiglini, 1999.

⁵⁷ Lundhaug 2017, 20–54; Lundhaug / Lied 2017, 29.

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