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Christians and the Codex: Generic Materiality and Early Gospel Traditions

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Why did Christians in the second through fifth centuries overwhelmingly utilize the codex format while other contemporaries used the scroll for literary texts almost exclusively? We offer the concept of “generic materiality,” which connects genre with material format. The early readers and users of the Gospel according to Mark in particular, and other gospels more generally, often described and treated them not as “books” with authors but as *ὑπομνήματα* or *commentarii*. Notebooks like *ὑπομνήματα* are typically described as circulating in *tabulae*, or the codex form. The prevalence of the codex form among second- through fifth-century biblical manuscripts derives in large part from durable generic expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that the earliest Christian “scriptures” are preserved, almost invariably, in the codex format, while the vast majority of contemporaneous literary sources survive in rolls?¹ The question has vexed historians since the publication of the Chester Beatty papyri in the 1930s. The ubiquitous

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1. By “scriptures” we mean texts that would become regarded in late antiquity as sacred and received as part of the New Testament in certain Christian communities.

use of codices from late antiquity through the modern era has obscured the convoluted history of the form, and has naturalized the idiosyncrasy of early Christian texts. Christian communities, from a very early date, transmitted their authoritative texts in a material form that was at odds with the prevailing book culture of the time, which demonstrably preferred the book roll over the codex for literary texts. Many explanations have been given, but none has proved widely persuasive.

The data are well known. According to the Leuven Database of Ancient Books, 3.2% of all known second-century literary and paraliterary manuscripts are codices, while 68.7% of manuscripts come from rolls.² Among identifiably Christian manuscripts, however, 77.4% are codices, while only 14.5% are preserved in rolls. Thus, the available data from the second century suggests a near inverse relationship between Christian manuscripts and all other manuscripts in terms of book roll and codex usage. Various explanations have been proposed. Some have seen the Christian preference for codices over rolls arising out of the needs of itinerant preachers or early Christian communities requiring easy access to a four-gospel canon. Some have seen the corpus of Pauline letters (compiled between c. 70 and 100 c.e.) as the impetus for other Christian writings to take codex form. Yet others have suggested the preference for codices reflects the Jewish nature of the earliest Christian communities. Others still have suggested that the adoption of the codex, being a peculiarly Roman form, can be understood as an index of Romanization. Each of these explanations incurs significant problems, many of which will be detailed below, and each is necessarily speculative, as the evidence for first- and second-century Christian texts is scant.

In addressing this topic, we do not propose to solve the “problem” or

Greek fragments of the Hebrew Bible have been excluded because it is often impossible to know whether manuscripts were produced by or for members of the Jesus movement; the usage of most *nomina sacra* to aid in identification is circular, at best. See AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Harvard Theological Studies 60 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 59n11. In any event, including Greek manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible would only make the contrast more stark.

2. Percentages based on data graciously provided by Willy Clarysse and Yanne Broux at the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) in May 2017. Manuscripts dated according to the “weighted dates” method described in Bart Van Beek and Mark Depauw, “Quantifying Imprecisely Dated Sources: A New Inclusive Method for Charting Diachronic Change in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” *Ancient Society* 43 (2013): 101–14; and Yanne Broux, *Double Names and Elite Strategy in Roman Egypt*, *Studia Hellenistica* 54 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 17–19.

offer a solution mutually exclusive of other proposed theories; the Christian preference for codices among our earliest evidence may well result from a confluence of factors. Rather, we propose a new way of approaching the question that brings together both the content and the material form of early Christian manuscripts, and we explain the early Christian preference for the codex form on the basis of generic expectations.

The earliest readers of gospel texts had an idea of what the text in front of them was, which is to say that they had an idea of their genre. Historians can understand something of first- and second-century Christian generic expectations by investigating how gospels were utilized. By paying attention to the way that the earliest readers of gospels described their texts, we can understand what genre these sources were thought to fall under, and perhaps find an explanation for the remarkable state of our evidence regarding Christian preference for codices. We argue that the earliest gospel manuscripts circulated in codices because their earliest readers considered them to belong to a genre that properly circulated in codex form: a genre of “unfinished” paraliterary material often referred to in antiquity as *ὑπομνήματα* (“notes”) or equivalent terminology.

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

Critical scholars of the New Testament, with near unanimity, argue that the text which became known as the “Gospel according to Mark” emerged before any of the other extant gospel texts, beginning to take shape perhaps sometime around 70 C.E. The earliest known reader of the text we now call the “Gospel according to Mark” was not Papias (writing c. 110–140 C.E.), nor was it Justin Martyr (writing c. 150 C.E.)—it was, in fact, the compiler of yet another gospel, this one later referred to under the title the “Gospel according to Matthew,” or perhaps the compiler of the “Gospel according to Luke.” Each of these later sources treats the text of the “Gospel according to Mark” not as a literary document—as a finished and published book. Rather, they interact with the text in a way that suggests their expectation that the Gospel according to Mark was, by genre, *ὑπομνήματα*: a loosely narrativized collection of stories and sayings that belong to an open textual tradition, not (yet) contained and stabilized by the metaphor of the “book.” The earliest commentators on the synoptic gospels, too, consider each as part of a larger, fluid tradition called “gospel” that is neither coterminous with nor restricted to the later “four-gospel” canon. Second-century thinkers like Papias, the writer of 2 Clement, Justin, Celsus, Theophilus of Antioch, and Clement of Alexandria have numerous and divergent ideas of what constitutes “gospel.” Overwhelmingly,

however, these thinkers understand “gospel” not as a single text or a set of closed and published books, but rather as a fluid, unfinished, and open constellation of textual objects related to an oral proclamation.³

Our argument is that scholars should not be surprised that the earliest gospel texts are overwhelmingly extant in codices, because fluid, open constellations of textual objects in the first and second century tended to be considered in the same manner as paraliterary texts, and were expected to circulate in a form consummate with their genre. Just as a contemporary reader would be surprised to see her newspaper delivered either in loose-leaf or in bound codex form rather than in the standard broadsheet or increasingly popular online format, the ancient Christian reader of “gospel” would expect the text, based on its genre, to be transmitted as a codex, either in the older wooden or the increasingly popular papyrus format.⁴

A holistic approach to first- and second-century gospel traditions will resist the separation of the textual tradition from its material forms. The earliest users of “gospel” demonstrably interacted with the gospel’s various textual forms in ways circumscribed by the genre of ὑπομνήματα, or its Latin equivalent *commentarii*.⁵ They interact with gospel texts and traditions, and speak about them too, in such a way as to indicate that these early gospel tradents thought their source material was a collection of ὑπομνήματα. Below we reinvestigate the Christian preference for the codex with an eye toward the relationship between the textual tradition of gospel texts, the genre in which early Christians considered those texts to take part, and the material format commensurate with its genre. The advantage of our genre-based interpretation of the Christian preference for the codex is that it explains why the early Christian texts took the codex form specifically, and does so with reference to visible first- and second-century reading practices.

3. See the full discussion in Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 24–48.

4. Newspapers present a peculiarly apt metaphor for the type of generic materiality for which we argue in this article. Consider that even the difference in format correlates with a powerful set of culturally dependent generic expectations. There is a difference between “broadsheet” (*The Guardian*) and “tabloid” (*The Daily Mail*) journalism. “Broadsheet” and “tabloid” are descriptors of the paper on which the journalism is printed, but these formats have come to signify generic aspects of the printed content.

5. No term in one language can perfectly capture the full essence of a term in another language. We treat ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* together because ancient writers themselves use the terms as synonyms. See, for example, Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 1.19.10; 2.1.1, and Josephus, *Life* 358.

STATUS QUAESTIONIS: THINGS AGREED

Commentators on the material form of early Christian manuscripts universally agree that the extant evidence conveys an overwhelming preference for the codex form in scriptural texts even while the majority of literary texts from the same time period were transmitted in rolls.⁶ Roger Bagnall demonstrated conclusively that Christians neither invented, nor were the main factor in popularizing the codex form for literature.⁷ Nor did Christians use the codex form to transmit non-scriptural literature significantly more often, proportionally, than their non-Christian neighbors;⁸ homilies,

6. Geoffrey Smith recently published a papyrus containing a fragment of the Gospel according to John on the recto and an "Unidentified Christian Text" on the verso, arguing that the artifact represents the first known New Testament text copied on the recto of a book roll: Geoffrey Smith, "Willoughby Papyrus: A New Fragment of John 1:49–2:1 (P134) and an Unidentified Christian Text," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 4 (2018): 935–58. Two major issues prevent arriving at this conclusion: the papyrus is not likely a reused roll, and it is not demonstrably a continuous NT text. Smith argues that the same scribe copied both sides of the fragment, beginning with the gospel fragment on the recto and the unidentified Christian text "some later time" (951). If the recto and verso were written by a different scribe, or if some significant amount of time passed between the scribal events, then the fragment is indeed a reused roll and not what it appears to be on first glance: an opisthograph. However, Smith only offers "slight differences in the ink hue and stroke thickness" (941) as evidence for separate writing events, and admits that the ancient fold is enough to account for the data (942n16). Evidence that this is a reused roll is not compelling. Second, the identification of the recto as a copy of the Gospel according to John, rather than an excerpted text or an amulet, rests on an assertion rather than a clear argument. Smith's case for the continuous nature of the recto is based on the observation that two pericopes appear in sequential order, which suggests a continuous text rather than excerpted material. There is no reason to think that the ancient scribe or user of this text divided this continuous text into two pericopes, however. The conclusion of the argument, in other words, is presupposed by an unsupported division of the text. Furthermore, the fragment was folded in antiquity in a manner suggesting use as an amulet, and both "pericopes" are known from other ancient Christian amulets. We would be very pleased to have an example of a New Testament text copied on a roll in antiquity. The Willoughby papyrus, however, is not a strong contender for the designation, and we would urge caution against such designations of this papyrus as "peerless" (952). This artifact most clearly resembles a strip of papyrus written on both sides, similar to the papyrus described by Eric G. Turner and W. E. H Cockle, "Complaint against a Policeman," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 68 (1982): 272–76.

7. Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 70–78. On this point see also Joseph van Haelst, "Les origines du codex," in *Les débuts du codex: Actes de la journée d'étude organisée à Paris les 3 et 4 juillet 1985*, ed. Alain Blanchard (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), 14.

8. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 76–78. See also Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 52.

for instance, tended to be transmitted in rolls. The only peculiarity of Christian book production is that they used a form that was demonstrably “non-literary” to record and transmit their scriptural texts.⁹ “Scriptures” were transmitted in non-bookish forms.

Further, it is widely agreed among numerous and divergent studies of this problem that there must be a reason for the state of our evidence, and that the most likely explanation of the Christian preference for the codex over the roll relates to the original form of one or more early Christian documents that set a precedent.¹⁰

As for the codex itself, the form is widely associated with Rome, and there is reason to think that it is a peculiarly Roman invention.¹¹ The parchment and papyrus codex is modeled on the Roman *tabula* (wood panels, bound together and either whitened or inset with wax), and was used extensively for legal and paraliterary texts.¹² The earliest literary attestation of a parchment codex is found in Martial’s *Epigrams* (1.2), where the poet commends small parchment codices (*brevibus membrana tabellis*) of his own works to the traveler in need of a companion, alerting the reader to a particular shop in Rome where such a product may be acquired. Martial’s advertisement does not appear to have been immediately successful in popularizing the codex style for literature; before the third century the codex was used predominantly for paraliterary and technical material.¹³

9. “To appreciate how peculiar this step was one must realize that a codex or leaf book was not recognized in antiquity as a proper book. It was regarded as a mere notebook, and its associations were strictly private and utilitarian.” (Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995], 49–50.)

10. Van Haelst, “Les débuts du codex,” 14. See also C. H. Roberts, “The Codex,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954): 189–91; C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 58; Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58.

11. Van Haelst, “Les débuts du codex,” 18.

12. Cf. Martial, *Epigrams* 14.7: “Parchment notebooks: imagine it to be wax, even though it is called parchment.” (*Pugillares membranei: Esse puta ceras, licet haec membrana vocetur*. Text and trans.: Martial, *Epigrams*, Vol. III: Books 11–14, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 480 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 232–33. See also C. H. Roberts, “The Codex,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 [1954], 169.)

13. E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 11. See also Roberts, “The Codex,” 185; van Haelst, “Les débuts du codex,” 13. Of course, there remains extant no significant body of manuscripts from Rome itself during the first three centuries C.E., so nothing comprehensive can be said about the “literary” use of the codex at Rome during the time of Martial’s literary output and in the immediate aftermath.

STATUS QUAESTIONIS: PROBLEMS

The history of scholarship on the Christian preference for scriptural codices boasts significant agreement on the problem, the facts, and the need for a historiographical solution. The solutions, however, differ drastically. Theories trend along a few discernable lines: veiled theologizing, speculation on the supposed “practicality” of the codex form over the roll, and a teleological understanding of the “inevitability” of the move from roll to codex.¹⁴ Roberts was the first scholar to offer a systematic explanation for the Christian preference for the codex, though his initial proposal has been widely dismissed for its uncritical acceptance of later patristic accounts of the apostolic movement.¹⁵ He argues that Mark the Evangelist (and “author” of the eponymous gospel) utilized the codex form to write Peter’s memoirs in Rome, and brought the form to Alexandria when he traveled to preach the gospel in North Africa. Roberts’s narrative cannot be accepted as is, though we will demonstrate below that he was not as far off track as later commentators have supposed in terms of gospel textuality. Roberts and Skeat accepted the critique of Roberts’s earlier work in a co-authored reappraisal of the evidence where they propose instead that Christian gospel forms mimicked textual forms of Jewish oral law. Harry Gamble incisively dismissed this revised proposition as “less objectionable . . . only because it is less specific.”¹⁶

Many historians have proposed solutions to the problem based in the perceived “practicality” of the codex form over the book roll for early Christian use, often in ways that involve second-order theologizing and anachronistic ideas relating to the four-gospel canon. For instance, Skeat argued that it was the “crisis” induced by the “publication” of the Gospel according to John that forced “the Church” to find a means by which four gospels could be circulated together.¹⁷ There are many problems with this thesis, the most damaging stemming from the unacceptably early dating

14. On the inevitability of the move from roll to codex, see Roberts, “The Codex,” 172, and van Haelst, “Les débuts du codex,” 34.

15. Roberts, “The Codex.”

16. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 57. For a thorough critique of Roberts and Skeat’s contention that the Christian preference for the codex form is based in Jewish conceptions of oral law, see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 57–58; as well as Robert A. Kraft, “The Gestation of the Codex,” (last modified April 2008): <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak/courses/735/book/gestation.html>.

17. T. C. Skeat, “The Origin of the Christian Codex,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 102 (1994): 267.

of the four-gospel canon. Further, the supposition that the Gospel according to John was “published” in the sense of a regular literary text, along with the concept of “the Church” as a unified set of communities, must be set aside for its ahistorical view of first- and second-century Christianity. Second-order rationalizations with underlying theological presumptions are rife in studies approaching this question.

In fact, the most persuasive arguments to date, those which consider the “practicality” of codices over rolls, tend to betray an underlying theological motivation. Skeat considers the use of the codex as a safeguard against intruding extra-canonical gospels, and a particularly effective one at that.¹⁸ Gamble likewise relies on the utilitarian aspects of the codex over the roll in a way that overlies a theological presumption about early Christian texts. His theory is that the early Christian adoption of the codex was modeled on Pauline letter collections, which (he argues) contained seven letters arranged in order of decreasing length. The collection of all seven letters into one single material form, Gamble argues, signified the “catholic relevance” of the Pauline letter collection in a way that could not be accomplished by a roll, which were not long enough to contain the entire collection.¹⁹ Thus an argument for the “practicality” of the codex form, again, obscures an underlying theological presumption about how early Christians viewed and used their texts, in this case intending to display materially the theological universalism of the collection. Bagnall rightly pointed out that reconstructions based on “practical” concerns invite too many counterfactual retorts: “. . . I find the entire idea that the choice of the form of a book was driven by the volume of material to be included in it very odd, an extreme kind of special pleading. Would such an argument be used if anything other than Christianity was at stake?”²⁰

There is yet another issue with the “practicality” argument, however, that has not been discussed: the evidence for ancient attitudes toward codices versus rolls has been overinterpreted, and in any event, it does not mean what scholars have proposed. Martial’s first book of epigrams, written and published in the late first century C.E., includes what amounts to an ancient product placement, urging readers to patronize a particular bookseller in Rome where one might buy Martial’s books in parchment codex form. This epigram is the chief witness to the “practicality” of a

18. “[The codex form] was, I believe, the solution reached. It was ingenious, daring, and totally successful, since no other Gospel gained entry into the Canon and none was lost.” (Skeat, “The Origin of the Christian Codex,” 268.)

19. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 62.

20. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 81.

codex form (over a roll) in the eyes of ancient book users. The text, however, does not speak to the codex form's superior utility over the roll, as has been asserted.

You who want my little books to keep you company wherever you may be and desire their companionship on a long journey, buy these, that parchment compresses in small pages (*brevibus membrana tabellis*). Give book boxes (*scrinia*) to the great, one hand grasps me.²¹

On first glance, it appears that Martial writes playfully about the superiority of parchment codex (*membrana tabellis*) over that of the roll for the purposes of travelers. Perhaps such an opinion is implied; it is not stated. Rather, Martial suggests that his own work is so pregnant with meaning that his reader may leave his *scrinium* (book box) at home. The contrast is not between a codex and a roll, but rather between a single copy of Martial's poems and a *whole bookshelf* of other material. The former, urges Martial, is quite enough to accompany a traveler on his journey.²² This is the only piece of evidence adduced to argue that ancient readers considered the codex to be a more portable form than the roll. It is poetic puffery, not evidence for practicality. The argument must be set aside as lacking evidence.²³

Other arguments for the utility of the codex over the roll have already been debunked. The cost savings on a codex over a roll are not negligible, but are not large enough to explain the phenomenon.²⁴ McCormick rightly notes that cost advantage "does not seem to have been a decisive factor in early Christian books, since they lack other obvious signs of

21. Martial, *Epigrams* 1.2 (text and trans.: *Martial, Epigrams, Volume I: Spectacles, Books 1–5*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 94 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 42–43).

22. Martial does mention codices of literary works elsewhere in his *Epigrams*: certainly at 14.184, 190; and he may refer to parchment codices in 14.186, 188, 192. He does no more than refer to them, however, so no inference can be made regarding the utility of this form over the roll.

23. Furthermore, "[t]here is no basis for thinking that many of our extant Christian codices from the second and third centuries were prepared for itinerant reading/usage" (Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 67). For examples of the "portability" argument, see also Eldon Jay Epp, "The Codex and Literacy in Early Christianity and at Oxyrhynchus: Issues Raised by Harry Y. Gamble's *Books and Readers in the Early Church*," *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 10 (1997): 15–37; Michael McCormick, "The Birth of the Codex and the Apostolic Life-Style," *Scriptorium* 39, no. 1 (1985): 150–58.

24. T. C. Skeat, "The Length of the Standard Papyrus Roll and the Cost-Advantage of the Codex," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45 (1982): 169–75. See also Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 50–69; Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 64.

cost-cutting.”²⁵ Similarly there is no evidence, apart from the Martial epigram discussed above, that ancient readers considered the operation of a scroll with any displeasure.²⁶ Moreover, an explanation cannot be found in Christians’ need to cross-reference between scriptural books. Such a proposal presupposes an early and extensive canon, and in any event the relevant form of readers’ aids do not appear in the earliest Christian manuscripts; finding a text in a codex without verse, chapter, or page markings is no easier than doing so in a roll.²⁷

Arguments for the “practicality” of the codex over the roll as an explanation for its adoption by Christians fail on these grounds, and on one more: they presuppose that Christians had different utilitarian needs from the rest of the Greco-Roman world, or that they met their utilitarian needs in a different way. Christians were not the only ancients who consulted authoritative books or collections of material, and yet they are the only group who adopted the codex so thoroughly in the second and third centuries, so far as our evidence attests. We cannot suppose that their version of “practicality” was all too different from their non-Christian neighbors; their use of the codex cannot be thus reasonably interpreted as arising out of utilitarian concerns.²⁸

Harry Gamble’s proposal has been given rightful pride of place among the solutions offered to date. He argued that it was the collection and dissemination of the earliest Christian texts—the Pauline letters—that set the standard for the way that subsequent scriptural texts circulated among Christians. His argument is well considered and impeccably articulated, but nevertheless it boils down to another instantiation of the “practicality” argument: Paul’s letters were easier to transport and utilize in codex form than in a roll.²⁹ Brent Nongbri has recently demonstrated that Gamble’s view of the codex as peculiarly suited to letter collections cannot be accepted. Many ancient letter collections from the time of Cicero onward

25. McCormick, “The Birth of the Codex and the Apostolic Life-Style,” 152–53.

26. T. C. Skeat, “Two Notes on Papyrus: 1: Was Re-Rolling a Papyrus Roll an Irsome and Time Consuming Task?,” in *Scritti in onore di Orsolina Monteverchi*, ed. Edda Bresciani (Bologna: Clueb, 1981), 373–76. See also T. C. Skeat, “Roll versus Codex—A New Approach?,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 84 (1990): 297–98.

27. For a recent restatement of the traditional “practicality” argument, along with a teleological presentation of the move to codices as inevitable, see Scott D. Charlesworth, *Early Christian Gospels: Their Production and Transmission* (Florence: Edizioni Gonnelli, 2016), 2.

28. A similar point is made by Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 65.

29. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 63.

are known to circulate in roll form, and in specific, non-chronological order, just as we see in the Pauline collection.³⁰ While Gamble's speculation regarding the practicality of the codex is plausible, his hypothesis is ultimately not compelling for the reasons stated above: we don't have any credible evidence that early Christians (or anyone else for that matter) thought that the codex was "practical" in the way that Gamble has asserted. It is, at the end of the day, speculation based on unverified assumptions concerning how ancient readers felt about books.

Bagnall and Gascou have each re-presented the evidence above to argue that the Christian adoption of the codex form can be seen as an effect of "Romanization."

Given the Roman character of tablets and the near-certainty that the codex originated at Rome from an adaptation of the codex of tablets, it seems logical to suggest that the wider, if gradual, adoption of the codex elsewhere is yet another manifestation of what for short we may still call Romanization, the spread of Roman habits and technologies throughout the empire.³¹

The point is laudable in its caution. The theory, however, constitutes merely a description of the problem, and not an explanation for the state of our evidence. "Romanization" does not satisfy as an answer to the question as stated: Why is it that Christians so overwhelmingly prefer the codex form over the roll for scriptural texts?³²

So we are left in the end with Gamble's proposal, which is based on a useful and thorough critique of previous scholars' presumption of an early four-gospel canon, along with the assertion that Paul's letters, so far

30. Brent Nongbri, "2 Corinthians and Possible Material Evidence for Composite Letters in Antiquity," in *Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 54–67. See especially 60n29: "It appears that Paul's letters were still being copied in roll format well into the late second century."

31. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 87. Bagnall here follows Jean Gascou, "Les codices documentaires égyptiens," in *Les débuts du codex: Actes de la journée d'étude organisée à Paris les 3 et 4 juillet 1985*, ed. Alain Blanchard (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), 75–76.

32. Harnett's recent article in *Classical Antiquity* commends the "S Curve" of "diffusion of innovations theory" as a model for the rise of the codex. Benjamin Harnett, "The Diffusion of the Codex," *Classical Antiquity* 36, no. 2 (2017): 183–235. The model is similar to Gascou, in that it serves to index the data, but not to offer a motivating explanation for the Christian preference. The implication of Harnett's model on our own question is to show that Christians cannot be held responsible for the diffusion of the codex, which was conclusively demonstrated already in Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 70–90.

as anyone can tell, were read as “authoritative texts” by Christian communities as early or earlier than the gospel canon upon which previous theories of Christian codex use were based.³³ His argument against such an anachronistic view of the authoritative four-gospel canon is well taken, and is certainly warranted. But before there was a four-gospel canon, there was an open tradition of “gospel” that circulated in parallel textualized and oral forms. If a reason can be given for these early gospel texts circulating in codex form specifically, then Gamble is not correct in asserting that “It is only in connection with a seven-churches edition of the Pauline letters that we can find in the early history of Christian literature both the materials and a motive that might have conspired to suggest the use of a codex rather than a roll.”³⁴ Available evidence for the way that early Christians understood and treated their scriptural texts—especially gospel texts—suggests that Christians were *precisely* using the codex for ὑπομνήματα, “notes.” That is, after all, what many understood the genre of the gospels to be, or so we argue below. Our suggestion is more plausible than Gamble’s for the reason that it utilizes ancient readers’ descriptions of the character of the text itself, and not merely modern speculation as to its use, to understand the material form upon which the text was transmitted.

GENERIC FEATURES OF ὙΠΟΜΝΗΜΑΤΑ AND COMMENTARII IN ANTIQUITY

Before we show how gospel texts (and particularly the text we now call the “Gospel according to Mark”) were described and utilized by readers as ὑπομνήματα in the first few centuries, we must briefly make a few points about the genre of ὑπομνήματα itself. There are problems with calling ὑπομνήματα a genre, in the same way that it is a problem to call the English word “notes” a genre.³⁵ One could think of ὑπομνήματα as a miscellaneous, paraliterary, catch-all genre, but it is better to think of ὑπομνήματα as a textual genre as opposed to a literary one. What unites the texts called ὑπομνήματα in antiquity is that they have similar textual functions and forms, rather than similar subject matters. Unlike ancient genres like biography, tragedy, or the epistle, which have highly theorized (even in antiquity) features of form and content, there is no clear marker

33. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58.

34. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 63.

35. See Matthew D. C. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. 11–36, 121–46.

of “family resemblances” for ὑπομνήματα in terms of content. The distinctive features of the genre of ὑπομνήματα appear, rather, in terms of what kinds of texts they are (or perhaps, more precisely, what kind of texts they are not) and how they function.

In antiquity, the term ὑπομνήματα could refer to a wide variety of texts, including writing as disparate as birth announcements, rough drafts, commentaries, physical trainers’ memoranda for their trainees while they are away, senate *acta*, Christian conciliar *acta*, medical treatises, histories, unpublished lecture notes, memoranda, minutes, bankers’ financial records, drafts or copies of letters, traders’ notebooks recording transactions, and so forth.³⁶ While each context determines the specific meaning, the English word “notes” roughly captures the breadth of the term.³⁷ So what holds this genre together as a coherent category, in antiquity or today? We offer a thematic analysis of some of the features of the genre. The best way to account for such an array of different kinds of text all being called ὑπομνήματα is to look at their various textual functions, noting, of course, that not all characteristics of textual function are equally present in different instantiations of ὑπομνήματα.

At the etymological core of the word ὑπομνήματα, as well as its Latin equivalent *commentarii*, is the notion of memory. While we want to avoid the “etymological fallacy,” many of the texts called ὑπομνήματα or *commentarii* do retain a textual function of reminding or preserving a memory in written form.³⁸

Discussions of ὑπομνήματα in antiquity often begin with Plato’s *Phaedrus*. There Socrates famously says that one “will write, when he writes, to treasure up reminders (ὑπομνήματα) for himself, when he comes to the forgetfulness of old age, and for others who follow the same path, and he will be pleased when he sees them putting forth tender leaves.”³⁹ Ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* refer to texts that are aids to human memory. In terms of textual function, they are meant to be consulted, used, and revisited more than they are meant to be read for pleasure in moments of leisure by an anonymous or public readership.

36. LSJ, s.v. “ὑπόμνημα.” See also Stephanie R. West, “Chalcenteric Negligence,” *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970): 288–96.

37. West, “Chalcenteric Negligence,” 291.

38. It should be remembered, however, that ὑπομνήματα or *commentarii* is not necessarily equivalent to the modern genre of “commentary”; the two are false friends.

39. Plato, *Phaedrus* 276d (Joannes Burnet, ed., *Platonis opera* [1901; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967], 2:276).

Consequently, then, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* usually do not refer to works of literature, but paraliterary (or pre-literary) texts. For example, *P.Mich.* 5.229 is a petition from a certain Petsiris to Apollonius, the *strategos*, asking for justice for having been wrongly beaten by Patynion and his son. The petition, dated to January 4, 48 C.E., refers to itself as a ὑπόμνημα. Many texts called ὑπομνήματα are similarly not “high literature,” but have a more utilitarian textual function.

As paraliterary texts, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* remain unfinished and open to future textual alteration. Plato’s *Statesman* brings this idea out nicely. In *Statesman* 295, the Stranger speaks with the younger Socrates about a scenario in which a physician or physical trainer must be away from patients. The doctor and trainer respectively write ὑπομνήματα to remind clients in their absence about their instructions. If, however, in their travels, the doctor or trainer happens to come up with improved regimens, trainings, or treatments, it is their duty to produce a new, altered edition of the notes for the benefit of their patients. Thus, ὑπομνήματα are provisional texts—they are not the kind of text that would exist in anything like a singular, stable, contained, definitive form.

Moreover, since they are usually not works of literature, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* were often untitled, and circulated without an ascribed author. In the often-discussed section of *On My Own Books*, Galen claims that many people have taken his writings, altered them, and claimed them as their own. The reason why people were able to do so was because the writings were nothing more than notes (ὑπομνήματα), given to friends or students, without a title (χωρὶς ἐπιγραφῆς).⁴⁰ The reason why they were untitled was because they were in not meant for publication (οὐδὲν πρὸς ἔκδοσιν). Hence it was easier for other people to come across Galen’s ὑπομνήματα, rework them, give them a title, and claim themselves as the authors of the resulting work than it would be with another type of written material. While other paraliterary ὑπομνήματα like Sulla’s (mentioned and used by Plutarch) as well as Polybius’s *Histories* have titles, ascribed authors, or other paratextual features like book divisions, Galen taps into a recognized cultural notion that ὑπομνήματα are revisable. His expectation is that ὑπομνήματα are untitled, unpublished, and hence prone to someone else making them their own by becoming their “author.”

Along the same lines, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* were typically expe-

40. Galen, *On My Own Books* preface (19.8–11K; Johann Marquandt, Iwan von Müller, and Georg Helmreich, eds., *Claudii Galeni Pergameni Scripta Minora*, 3 vols. [Leipzig: Teubner, 1884–93], Vol. 2 [repr. Amsterdam, A. M. Hakkert, 1967], 91–93).

rienced by readers in antiquity as less-authored texts. A writer is the one who performed the physical act of writing, while an author is a socially negotiated figure endowed with authority or other form of status.⁴¹ The textual category of ὑπομνήματα/*commentarii* referred to texts that are less-authored, especially when compared to works of proper literature. As a result, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* are frequently described by their producer or readers as unpublished or not intended for a broad, anonymous readership. There was a variety of ways to “publish” a text in antiquity, such as organizing a public reading or giving a work to a patron with the expectation of circulation, but publication was essentially a socially negotiated and recognized idea that a text exists among a “public” anonymous readership. Arrian, the second-century disciple of Epictetus, took notes of his master’s teaching, which we now call Epictetus’s *Discourses*. Arrian complained that his notes, which were intended only for his own recollection, were made public against his will and without his knowledge.

Arrian to Lucius Gellius. Greetings. I neither authored the *Discourses* of Epictetus in the same way as someone might author such things nor did I circulate it publicly among people—what’s more, I don’t even claim to have authored it. But I tried to write down everything I heard him saying in his own words as best I could in order to preserve memory aids (ὑπομνήματα) of his thinking and his candor for myself at a later time (εἰς ὕστερον ἐμαυτῷ). The *Discourses* are the kind of thing someone might say on the spot when prompted, not the kind of thing someone might compose for others to read at a later time. Being what they are, I don’t know how they were brought out into public circulation without my consent and without my knowledge.⁴²

As the example above shows, one must not assume that just because a work from antiquity survives, it must have been finished and published by the “author.” Accidental publication was a regular occurrence in a variety of different times, places, and cultures throughout the ancient world.⁴³ Arrian claims he wrote the ὑπομνήματα but did not author them.

It is no surprise, then, that people of a certain social status are more likely to write ὑπομνήματα than they are to write formal literature. Ὑπομνήματα

41. On the writer vis-à-vis author, see John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 11.

42. Arrian, *Letter to Gellius* 1–4 (Heinrich Schenkl, ed., *Epicteti dissertationes ab Arriano digestae* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1916], 5).

43. On publication, in the ancient world, accidental and otherwise, see Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 1–10, 37–51.

or *commentarii* were the central domain of production for “lower status specialists” like doctors, builders, and soldiers.⁴⁴ Literate slaves, merchants, court scribes: these people would more commonly produce ὑπομνήματα than proper, “authored” literary works. Lucian of Samosata draws out the distinction in his treatise *How to Write History*:

Then someone else produces a ὑπόμνημα, collecting together in writing events that have happened—just as bare, prosaic, and everyday as some soldier would put it together when writing in a daily journal, or a manual laborer or some merchant traveling along with an army. But at least this everyday kind of writer does something quite fitting. He is quite upfront about what he is doing: he has worked up materials ahead of time for some accomplished person who is competent to handle the writing of history. But here is precisely where I find fault. He [Kallimorphos] presents his writings in a rather highfalutin manner or in the manner of proper books (κατὰ τὴν τῶν συγγραμμάτων τύχην).⁴⁵

Anyone could write ὑπομνήματα, from Julius Caesar all the way down to lower status people like Kallimorphos. Lucian, however, was scandalized that someone less socially elite like Kallimorphos would dare to write a history of the Parthians in the style of “proper books.” Cicero himself commented on the quality of Julius Caesar’s *commentarii*, saying that they are excellent in their brevity, and well written, but he thinks nevertheless that Caesar’s text is not ready for publication precisely because it was not yet properly authored.⁴⁶

With all of the above in mind, it makes sense that ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* had a different function from texts that readers experienced as formal, authored literature. Whereas an author might compose a piece of literature with the idea that a reader will read it for pleasure in moments of leisure, ὑπομνήματα and *commentarii* were meant to be used; they were a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves.⁴⁷ Oftentimes ὑπομνήματα had the same producer and user—one makes notes for one’s own records or recollection. They may, however, be shared with other readers. The beginning of Plutarch’s *On the Tranquility of the Soul* makes the point well. Paccius requests a book on contentment, and Plutarch offers the following explanation of the document he sends:

44. Andrew Riggsby, “Formal Questions,” in *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 134.

45. Lucian, *How to Write History* 16 (K. Kilburn, *Lucian* [1959; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968], 6:24–26).

46. Cicero, *Brutus* 262 (Cicero, *Brutus, Orator*, ed. and trans. G. L. Hendrickson and H. M. Hubbell, LCL 342 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939], 226–27).

47. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 19.

Since I neither had time to produce [the work] you were wanting, as I would have preferred, nor could I have endured him being seen to arrive from me at your house completely empty-handed, I picked up *Contentment* from the notes that I just happened to have made for myself (ἀνελεξάμην περὶ εὐθυμίας ἐκ τῶν ὑπομνημάτων ὧν ἐμαυτῷ πεποιημένος ἐτύγχανον), since I considered that you also wanted this discourse not for the purpose of hearing something striving to be an elegant piece of writing (οὐκ ἀκροάσεως ἔνεκα θηρωμένης καλλιγραφίαν) but for practical living purposes (χρείας βοηθητικῆς ἐπιζητεῖν).⁴⁸

Plutarch presents the writings he sends to Paccius in a particular way: as notebooks (ὑπομνήματα) that he just happened to have jotted down for himself. They were on a topic relevant to Paccius's request. When Plutarch shares them, he offers the caveat that they are only notes—not proper books—and underlines that Paccius should read them as such. Plutarch then offers a comment on the function of notes vis-à-vis polished writings. Whereas someone may hunt down other more polished works of literature for the purpose of hearing elegant writing, notes were used for practical living purposes. Ὑπομνήματα were unfinished notebooks designed for utilitarian purposes, not necessarily to be enjoyed as elegant literature.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK AS ὙΠΟΜΝΗΜΑΤΑ

There is no evidence for anyone regarding “gospel” as a book published by an author until the end of the second century. Irenaeus presents the earliest evidence of such an idea, as we will discuss below.⁴⁹ Throughout the first centuries of the Common Era, a variety of different discourses circulated about the textuality of the gospel, but none of them considered “gospel” to be an authored collection of material circulated primarily or exclusively as a text. While considering the gospel as a book published by an author became a dominant way of thinking about the textuality of the gospels in the third century and onward, prior discourses did not disappear, but remained an active way of describing the textuality of the gospels well into late antiquity. As stated so eloquently by Parker, “. . . any writer who crystallises a point in a changing tradition (which he thereby also changes) must accept that his writing may also be liable to alteration

48. Plutarch, *On the Tranquility of the Soul* 464e–f (Max Pohlenz, ed., *Plutarchi moralia* [1929; repr., Leipzig: Teubner, 1972], 3:187–88).

49. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 (*Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, Livre 3, Vol. 2*, ed. and trans. L. Doutreleau and A. Rousseau, SC 211 [Paris: Cerf, 1974], 22–25).

by somebody else. And once this is acknowledged, then the concept of a Gospel that is fixed in shape, authoritative, and final as a piece of literature has to be abandoned.”⁵⁰

The Gospel according to Mark in particular was experienced, described, and used by its earliest readers as rough, unpolished, unfinished, and unpublished notes—like ὑπομνήματα. The earliest extant reader of the text of the Gospel according to Mark who explicitly characterizes the state of the text is the writer of the preface of the Gospel according to Luke. In this preface, the Gospel according to Luke is compared with previous attempts to write about the life of Jesus, including in the Gospel according to Mark. Thus, when the preface describes the textuality of its sources, it provides access to how the writer experiences the Gospel according to Mark:

Since lots of other people have attempted to organize (ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι) the story about what has been fulfilled among us, just as the witnesses from the beginning and the servants of the story handed it down to us, it also seemed good for me, since I had followed closely (παρηκολουθηκότι) and carefully (ἀκριβῶς) everything from the beginning (ἄνωθεν), to write [the story] for you, most excellent Theophilus, in order that you might know the convincing nature (ἀσφάλειαν) of the things you were taught.⁵¹

Elsewhere when the writer of Luke and Acts uses the term “attempted,” it refers to a failed attempt.⁵² This usage is no different. What previous attempts have failed to do is to provide a careful description and proper organization to the story about Jesus. Τάξις, according to Lucian of Samosata, is what one adds to a rough draft (ὑπόμνημα) in the process of polishing it and preparing it for completion, preparing it for “authorship.”⁵³ In this relationship, the Gospel according to Luke considers itself to be a finished, polished edition that is based on rough and unpolished previous attempts, including the Gospel according to Mark. What other attempts like the Gospel according to Mark lack is an arrangement (τάξις) that leads the reader to question the convincing nature of the story. The preface distinguishes the Gospel according to Luke’s account of the gospel by claiming it is ἀκριβῆς, carefully organized, more so than its sources. The

50. David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

51. Luke 1.1–4 (*Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th rev. ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993], 177).

52. Acts 9.29; 19.13. See, however, François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 19n24.

53. Lucian, *How to Write History* 48 (LCL 430:60–61).

writer of the Gospel according to Luke uses texts like the Gospel according to Mark in a way parallel to the way Plutarch uses his own ὑπομνήματα. This in turn suggests that the writer of the Gospel according to Luke considered the Gospel according to Mark to be ὑπομνήματα itself; at least the writer uses his source in the same way.⁵⁴

Eusebius's understanding of the preface of the Gospel according to Luke confirms our reading. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius explains that the other attempts mentioned by "Luke" were "somewhat rashly" (προπετέστερον) put together.⁵⁵ While the preface in Luke 1.1–4 does not use the word ὑπομνήματα, it seems the writer regarded the text we now call Gospel according to Mark as unpolished, rough writings, in the same way that Plutarch thought of and used his own ὑπομνήματα.

Papias also wrote a description of the origin and composition of the "Gospel according to Mark" and the "Gospel according to Matthew." Eusebius preserves comments from Papias, who describes the texts as follows:

And the elder used to say the following: Mark, who was Peter's interpreter (ἐρμηνευτής), carefully wrote everything he remembered (ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν) that the Lord had said and done, although he did not add any arrangement to it (οὐ μέντοι τάξει). For Mark neither heard the Lord nor followed him closely (παρηκολούθησεν αὐτῷ), but later, as I mentioned, he followed closely Peter, who used to adopt his teaching to the form of χρεῖαι [short punchy anecdotes],⁵⁶ but he did not make, as it were, an orderly arrangement (οὐκ ὥσπερ σύνταξιν) of the dominical *logia* (τῶν κυριακῶν ποιούμενος λογίων). So, Mark did not make a mistake when he wrote down some of the things he remembered (ἀπομνημόνευσεν). . . . [S]o while Matthew arranged the *logia* (τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο) in the Hebrew dialect, everyone interpreted (or, "explained") [the λόγια] to the best of his ability.⁵⁷

According to Papias, figures named "Mark" and "Matthew" are textualizers of the fluid and revisable λόγια of Jesus. Papias compares both instantiations of the λόγια and highlights their differences. Papias claims that "Mark" recorded Peter's teaching in the form of ἀπομνημονεύματα, which, for Papias in this context, is a synonym of ὑπομνήματα.⁵⁸ His textualized

54. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 83–87.

55. Eusebius, *HE* 3.24.14–15 (Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Eusebius Werke*, Vol. 2.1, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, GCS 6.1 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1902], 248–50; see also Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 86).

56. It is also possible to translate πρὸς τὰς χρεῖας as Peter adopting his teachings to the needs of the moment. In the present context, though, this seems the less likely reading.

57. Eusebius, *HE* 3.39.15–16 (GCS 6.1:290–92).

58. See Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 87–93. See also George Kennedy, "Classical and Christian Source Criticism," in *The Relationships between the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. William O. Walker (San Antonio, TX: Trinity

form of the λόγια of Jesus records everything he heard, but his notebooks lack τάξις or σύνταξις, which is difficult to translate into English but in this context has the sense of literary organization, structure, or arrangement.⁵⁹ According to Papias, “Matthew” continues to rework the λόγια of Jesus, and his work was to supply σύνταξις to the λόγια. Papias does not speak of the “Gospel according to Mark” or the “Gospel according to Matthew.” He does not refer to a gospel or the gospel at all, nor does he treat “Mark” or “Matthew” as authors of books. Their texts are both a part of an expanding tradition of textualized λόγια.

Irenaeus, writing toward the end of the second century, is the first evidence we have of anyone treating the gospel as a book published by an author. Yet even Irenaeus treats the Gospel according to Mark as possessing a textuality and textual origin different from the other gospels in his canon.

Now Matthew published (ἐξήνεγκεν) a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were proclaiming the Gospel in Rome and founding the church. After their death, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also passed Peter’s preaching down to us writtenly (ἐγγράφως . . . παραδέδωκεν). Luke, the follower of Paul, also put the Gospel preached by Paul down in a book (ἐν βιβλῳ κατέθετο). Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who reclined on the Lord’s breast, he also published (ἐξέδωκεν) the Gospel while he was residing in Ephesus of Asia.⁶⁰

In Irenaeus’s configuration, only two of the gospels are “published”; “Matthew” and “John” published the gospel as a book. Of the two that are not regarded as published, one is a book and one is not. According to Irenaeus “Luke” puts the gospel of Paul down in a book. “Mark,” however, is neither a book nor published, but is the passing down of oral tradition “writtenly” (ἐγγράφως). In the mind of Irenaeus as well, when compared to other gospels, the text we now call the Gospel according to Mark is less finished, less bookish, less published, and more like a textualized memory

International Press, 1978) 125–55; David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 66–67; Yoon-Man Park, *Mark’s Memory Resources and the Controversy Stories (Mark 2:1–3:6): An Application of the Frame Theory of Cognitive Science to the Markan Oral-Aural Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53.

59. Τάξις is what one would add to a rough draft as one polishes it, as we saw above in the comments of Lucian, a rough contemporary of both Papias and the author of the Gospel according to Luke. Lucian, *How to Write History* 47–48 (LCL 430:60–61).

60. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 (SC 211:22–25). This fragment of Irenaeus’s original Greek is extant due to a quotation in Eusebius, *HE* 5.8.2–4.

aid of oral tradition. Though Irenaeus does not use the word ὑπομνήματα, the term aptly captures Irenaeus's description of the text.

Clement of Alexandria, however, does explicitly call the Gospel according to Mark a ὑπόμνημα. In a fragment preserved in the second book of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, we find this story:

Such a pious light illuminated the minds of those who heard Peter that a single hearing of Peter was not nearly enough nor was the unwritten teaching of his divine proclamation. So, with constant requests they were begging Mark, whose gospel is in circulation (οὗ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον φέρεται), who was a follower of Peter, that he might leave behind for them a written memory aid (διὰ γραφῆς ὑπόμνημα) of teaching passed down orally, and they did not leave him alone until they were successful. And it was in this way that they became the cause of the writing that is called the *Gospel according to Mark*.⁶¹

The tradition cited above is often attributed to Papias, but in fact Eusebius claims that the quote comes from Clement of Alexandria and that the remarks of Papias mentioned above corroborate the Clement quotation.⁶² Whoever the ultimate source may be, it is clear that Clement, Papias, and many others in the first few centuries C.E. understood gospel traditions as textualized raw material. Clement explicitly invokes a notion of a book that is based on loosely structured reminiscences in need of polish—ὑπομνήματα—and calls this the “Gospel according to Mark.” Papias refers rather to ἀπομνημονεύματα, which, as George Kennedy noted, is a synonym of ὑπομνήματα.⁶³ Eusebius contends that Clement and Papias are in full agreement about the source and textual character of the Gospel according to Mark.

Corroborating the view that the Gospel according to Mark is experienced by early readers as ὑπομνήματα are its five different endings.⁶⁴ Textual critics have typically tried to figure out which ending is the “right” one—the ending intended by the original author—and which ones are corruptions or later additions. If the Gospel according to Mark was an authored, published book, then such questions about post-publication corruptions are understandable. But the very fact that there are multiple endings suggests

61. HE 2.15 (GCS 6.1:140).

62. On wrongly attributing the story to Papias, see Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 96–98.

63. Kennedy, “Classical and Christian Source Criticism,” 125–55.

64. For a fuller analysis of the multiple endings of the Gospel according to Mark, see Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 114–20.

that readers of the Gospel according to Mark, even late into its textual history (e.g., the “Freer Logion” in the fifth-century Codex Washingtonianus), treated the text as open and unfinished. Their creation of new endings, like the so-called “longer ending” that became part of the tradition by the mid-second century, suggests that several readers viewed the textual tradition as something they could change and improve—as ὑπομνήματα.

When we approach the Gospel according to Mark as its earliest readers did, not as a book published by an author but as unfinished notes, it changes the way we think about the Gospel according to Matthew’s use of the Gospel according to Mark. When read from the perspective of its earliest readers, the Gospel according to Matthew is not a new, separate book, but a continuation of the same open-ended textual tradition of gospel.⁶⁵ It continues to rework the unfinished textual raw material of the Gospel according to Mark. The Gospel according to Mark and the Gospel according to Matthew are more similar to each other than any other textual tradition in antiquity. In our conception, they are not separate textual traditions in the first place, but rather two different textual instantiations (one earlier and one later, one less “finished” and one more so) of an open, expanding gospel tradition—precisely how the material is described by its earliest readers.⁶⁶

OTHER GOSPELS AS ὙΠΟΜΝΗΜΑΤΑ

While some early commentators discuss only the Gospel according to Mark as ὑπομνήματα, others consider a broader spectrum of gospel tradition to fall into this textual genre. That is to say, however the writer of the Gospel according to Luke regarded his/her own work vis-à-vis the Gospel according to Mark, later readers nevertheless subsumed that gospel, along with others gospel texts more generally, under the textual genre of ὑπομνήματα.

Justin Martyr famously refers to the texts we now call the gospels most commonly as ἀπομνημονεύματα. He refers to the “memoirs of the apostles” dozens of times in his writings. In *1 Apology* 66.3 he indicates that these ἀπομνημονεύματα are called “gospels.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, when Justin

65. For a full argument, see Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 99–114.

66. See E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity International Press, 1989), 51.

67. Justin, *Apologie pour les chrétiens: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, ed. and trans. Charles Munier, SC 507 (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 306. Justin’s use of the plural “gospels” does not necessarily indicate he was aware multiple discrete gospel books. Prior to Christian use of the term, the plural word “gospels” was com-

introduces teachings known from gospels texts (1 *Ap.* 15–17), he doesn't claim to be quoting from an authored work, but simply to be relating "what Jesus said." It is clear that Justin had some sort of gospel material in front of him, but he didn't think that it was a "book."⁶⁸ Tertullian, in his *On Fasting*, refers to "the self-same *commentarius* of Luke," by which he means the Acts of the Apostles, the second of a two-part series of writings that includes the Gospel according to Luke.⁶⁹

Celsus, the second-century philosopher and opponent of Christians, provides us with a way to view the textuality of the gospel before such ideas as book, author, and publication were a part of the discourse. Origen preserves the comment from Celsus's *True Discourse* in his book, *Against Celsus*:

[Celsus] says that some believers, as if in a drunken brawl with one another, alter and remodel the *Gospel* from its initial written form (μεταχαράττειν ἐκ τῆς πρώτης γραφῆς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον . . . μεταπλάττειν)—three times, four times, many times—so that they might be able to give a rebuttal in the face of critical accusations.⁷⁰

Celsus does not think of multiple gospels, but of the singular, articular "gospel." Yet this gospel is textualized, and has multiple nomadic iterations. Early Christians, to his mind, were regularly perpetuating an expanding constellation of texts called "the *Gospel*" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον).

Elsewhere in book two of *Contra Celsum*, Origen responds to Celsus's critique that the disciples invented the idea that Jesus predicted the future. His response is: "For they would never say that those who knew and who heard Jesus himself passed down his teaching of the gospels without writing, and left his disciples without the notes (ὑπομνήματα) about Jesus in documents."⁷¹ Here we find the "teaching of the gospels" (τὴν τῶν εὐαγγελίων . . . διδασκαλίαν) paralleled with "the ὑπομνήματα about Jesus" (τῶν περὶ Ἰησοῦ . . . ὑπομνημάτων).

Similarly, while Eusebius regularly employs a book/author discourse to think about the gospels, here he nevertheless preserves memories of the gospels before they were considered to be books. In addition to the

monly used to refer to a singular message of good news. See, for example, Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 2.3.1.

68. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 31.

69. Tertullian, *On Fasting* 10.3 (CSEL 20.286).

70. *Against Celsus* 2.27 (Origène, *Contre Celse*, Tome I, *Livres I et II: Introduction, texte critique, traduction, et notes*, ed. and trans. Marcel Borret, SC 132 [Paris: Cerf, 1967], 356).

71. Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.13 (SC 132:318–24).

Gospel according to Mark, which we discussed above, Eusebius also calls other gospels ὑπομνήματα. Writing about the order of the gospels, Eusebius writes, “Yet nonetheless, out of all the people who spent time with the Lord, only Matthew and John left ὑπομνήματα for us. And tradition is that they wrote [the ὑπομνήματα] out of a sense of necessity.”⁷²

Non-canonical gospels likewise remember and refer to stories about Jesus’s life as taking the form of ὑπομνήματα. The *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which incorporates the *Acts of Pilate*, is a fourth-century work that opens its prologue by identifying itself with the following words: “Records of our Lord Jesus Christ made during the time of Pontius Pilate” (Ὑπομνήματα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πραχθέντα ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου).⁷³ In recounting its own textual history, some manuscripts of the *Acts of Pilate* claim that a certain “Ananias” searched the records made during the time of Pontius Pilate to see how the case of Jesus was treated. He finds some ὑπομνήματα written in Hebrew, which he translates into Greek, and asks that those who would take these ὑπομνήματα and rework them into literary texts would remember him. Importantly, the text narrating the events of Jesus’s trial, death, descent to hell, and resurrection, which were produced to look like a record made during Jesus’s own time, are imagined as ὑπομνήματα.⁷⁴

Justin Martyr also refers to “Acts of Pilate.” Citing that those who crucified Jesus cast lots for his clothing, he writes, “these things you will learn from the ἄκτων made during the time of Pontius Pilate.”⁷⁵ It is interesting that Justin, writing in Greek, nevertheless preserves the Latin form ἄκτων [= *acta*], a technical term for a specific type of legal material. Justin himself was familiar with Roman legal forms, as evidenced in his own apology to the emperor, and he appears to retain the Latin term while writing in Greek as an indication that the texts he had in mind were formal Roman legal materials.

A variety of early Christians, then, had the idea that a record made by Pontius Pilate or those of his administration, which told of the trial and death of Jesus, existed in circulation, and would have been available to officials in Rome and elsewhere. In the Christian imagination, such a text was labeled as ὑπομνήματα or *acta*. Thus, it is not the case that *only* the

72. Eusebius, *HE* 3.24.5 (GCS 6.1:246).

73. *Gospel of Nicodemus* prologue (Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, eds., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 424).

74. Eusebius likewise mentions ὑπομνήματα of Pilate, but he regards the ones he mentions as blasphemous and forged: Eusebius, *HE* 9.5.1.

75. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 35, 48 (SC 507:222, 254).

Gospel according to Mark was experienced by first- and early second-century readers as ὑπομνήματα, but that stories of Jesus—various textualized iterations—were regarded as, or at least remembered as, ὑπομνήματα well into the fourth century across a wide variety of contexts and locations.

GENERIC MATERIALITY: MATERIAL FORMS AND THE DURABILITY OF GENERIC EXPECTATIONS

Having established that gospel material was regarded as ὑπομνήματα by many early Christian users and commentators, we propose genre, and attendance to generic expectations, as a step toward a more holistic approach to the earliest Christian manuscripts and to the question of Christian adoption of the codex form. Generic expectations are necessarily second-order abstractions about textual traditions, and we cannot assume that ancient readers held the same ideas about the relationship between genre and material form as contemporary scholars, or that all ancient readers thought alike. But when ancient readers do discuss generic characteristics and the material form of a textual tradition, historians are well served to take note. It is the way that the earliest Christian readers interact with and write about textualized gospel traditions that betrays their generic expectations. Many early Christian readers and commentators considered gospel to fit within the genre of ὑπομνήματα/*commentarii*. And when texts of this type are described materially in Roman sources from the period under investigation, they often are described as circulating in codices.

Scholars interested in the history of the book have pointed us toward the use of genre as an analytical tool in understanding the material forms of ancient texts. A recent and influential survey of early Christian book culture has noted that “the transition from roll to codex happened only very gradually During that period, the likelihood that a specific book would take one of the two available forms rather than the other depended primarily on the genre and readership of the text(s) that it enclosed.”⁷⁶ Grafton and Williams here refer to extraordinary durability of generic expectations among classical and late antique scribes and readers. For instance, Elizabeth Meyer has demonstrated that long after the Roman state had relinquished governance of Egypt, the material forms of tax lists, and even their Roman name (ταβλία for the Latin *tabulae*, a codex)

76. Anthony Grafton and Megan Hale Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 10–12.

remained in use.⁷⁷ Likewise, Meyer notes that even though wood was an extra expense in Egypt, nevertheless for matters of family and transmission of property, wooden codices were inscribed in Latin, in imitation of the convention at Rome.⁷⁸ Similarly, in the first and second centuries C.E., even when tax documents were drawn up in Greek, they were made on waxed or whitened codices in imitation of their Roman counterparts. Meyer shows that there was a traditionalism to generic materiality; scribes knew the material forms of different genres, and tended to stick to them even in the provinces, even when it was inconvenient, even when it was more expensive.⁷⁹

Paraliterary texts from the provinces as well show knowledge of Roman generic expectations, and often mimic the form of Roman documents in their own way. The use of double documents (in which two copies of the same text are written on a sheet, one bound and sealed while the other is left open to read) in the eastern Roman empire shows a cognizance of Roman forms and an attempt to comply with generic standards. Many have noted, as well, that the ending of the canonical Apocalypse (composed in the late first or early second century) presumes familiarity with Roman documentary standards: the prophecies of the Apocalypse are transparently depicted as being contained on Roman double documents.⁸⁰ The prophecies of an Aramaic (or Hebrew) speaker in a Roman province of the late first or early second century C.E. presuppose significant knowledge of Roman documentary forms—in fact, this generic knowledge is central to the narrative itself. While no one would argue that the John who wrote from Patmos has spent time in a Roman courthouse, nevertheless he reflects significant knowledge of Roman documentary forms.⁸¹

Elisabeth Meyer has shown conclusively that papyrus codices were created as approximations of Roman *tabulae* and that papyrus codices elicited the same readerly expectations among their users as did the *tabulae* which they mimic.⁸² Whether the material used to create the writing

77. Elizabeth A. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law in the Roman World: Tabulae in Roman Belief and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174.

78. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law*, 175.

79. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law*, 183–84.

80. Revelation 5.1. See Craig R. Koester, ed., *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2014), 374; Eric G. Turner, *The Terms Recto and Verso: The Anatomy of the Papyrus Roll*, Actes du 15, Congrès international de papyrologie 16 (Brussels: Fondation Egyptologique Reine Elisabeth, 1978), 44.

81. Cf. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law*, 201.

82. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law*, 23–35.

surface was wood, papyrus, or parchment, it was the codex/*tabula* shape that invoked generic expectations regarding the type of text that might be found between the leaves. Most importantly for our purposes here, codices were the expected form of transmission for *commentarii*/ὑπομνήματα.

“Commentaries” were, from their postulated etymology and actual usage, functional creations, ranging from preparatory musings for speeches to writings by grammarians and jurists to farming advice to reminiscences of your adventures as a magistrate to useful collections of (with learned insights into) augural and priestly lore. They were synthetic and analytical ruminations in continuous prose on facts and experiences Commentaries created links *between* specific pieces of information which existed in final form on *tabulae*.⁸³

Commentarii/ὑπομνήματα were generalized terms in the Roman empire, widely used and understood to encompass, as Meyer notes above, everything from legal rulings and the writings of grammarians to reminiscences of adventures and collections of stories. Meyer’s description of Roman *commentarii* might just as well be used to describe the textual tradition we now call the Gospel according to Mark as it was understood by its earliest readers. And, importantly, these types of *commentarii*/ὑπομνήματα were tightly bound with the material form of the text.

An explicit connection between *commentarii*/ὑπομνήματα and the codex form is discernible in many ancient and late ancient Roman contexts. Consider, for instance, the first-century B.C.E. *Senatus consultum de Amphiarai Oropii agris*, which describes the material form of consular ὑπομνήματα as a collection of codices.⁸⁴ Likewise in Galen’s second-century C.E. *On Difficulty Breathing* he reports that works (ὑπομνήματα) of Hippocrates were transmitted in codices.⁸⁵

The closest parallel to the early Christian conception of gospel texts as ὑπομνήματα comes from a written account of the life of another first-century holy man as recorded by one of his disciples. Philostratus wrote his account of the life of Apollonius of Tyana in the early third century using a narrative written by a Syrian named Damis as a source. He tells us that Damis was a disciple and traveling companion of Apollonius, and that he wrote

83. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law*, 32–33. Meyer adds that “. . . Magistrates’ *acta* [were] also called *hypomnemata*” (33n67).

84. FIRA¹ 263.31 refers to εἰς τὴν τῶν ὑπομνημάτων δέλτον (Salvatore Riccobono et al., eds., *Fontes Iuris Romani Antejustiniani* [Florence: Barbèra, 1941], 1:263).

85. Galen, *On Difficulty Breathing* 3.1 (7.890–91K). See also Galen, *On Difficulty Breathing* 2.8 (7.854–55K), which records that two ὑπομνήματα of Hippocrates’s *Epideemics* exist in the form of τὰ ἐκ τοῦ μικροῦ πινακιδίου (two small tablets).

ὑπομνήματα concerning his teacher's "doctrines, sayings, and predictions" (καὶ γνώμας καὶ λόγους καὶ ὅποσα ἐξ πρόγνωσιν εἶπε). Philostratus reports that he has a copy of these ὑπομνήματα, the so-called "Scrapbook" by Damis, and that they came to him in codex form (τὰς δέλτους τῶν ὑπομνημάτων).⁸⁶

Damis's "*Scrapbook*" was an account of his leader's teachings—a loosely structured collection of sayings and stories about an itinerant holy man. Later readers of this text considered it to be ὑπομνήματα, and they complained that it lacked literary polish, being little more than a collection of everything that Damis could remember regarding his teacher.⁸⁷ This loose collection of sayings, stories, and predictions circulated in codices. Needless to say, the precision of this parallel with the Gospel according to Mark, and its reception among later readers, is uncanny.

In the fourth century, too, the homilist Asterius described in great detail a painting that he had seen near the tomb of the martyr Euphemia depicting her last moments. It is a seemingly minute detail, easily left out, that points us to the generic expectations surrounding ὑπομνήματα even as late as the fourth century. Asterius describes in the painting the "writers of ὑπομνήματα," carrying codices with their styluses at the ready trying to catch every word spoken by the martyr, "lest he grow weary in hearing and record false and reprehensible things."⁸⁸ Once again the type of writing and the material form that it takes are closely bound in the imagination of readers.

GOSPEL AS CODEX

If the earliest readers of gospels considered the text in front of them to be generically *commentarii*/ὑπομνήματα, then the surprising fact is not that gospel texts were transmitted in codices, but that gospel material should appear in rolls at all. The form of the text, and the earliest readers' use of gospel material, betrays a conception of the text's genre that presupposes

86. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.3.1 (Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Vol. 1: *Life of Apollonius of Tyana, Books 1–4*, ed. and trans. Christopher P. Jones, LCL 16 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005], 38). See Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 34–36.

87. See 1.19.3, where he speaks of the reception of Damis's work and repeats that the text circulated in the codex format. The accusations are, of course, strikingly reminiscent of the prologue to the Gospel according to Luke, which presents its own sources, including the Gospel according to Mark, as lacking the same sort of literary polish. See Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, 83–87.

88. Asterius, *The Ecphrasis of Euphemia's Martyrdom* 3.1 (C. Datema, ed., *Homilies I–XIV: Text, Introduction and Notes* [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 154).

the codex form. Previous commentators on the problem of Christian preference for the codex have noted many times over that the codex was generally associated with paraliterary materials. The intervention that we make here points out that the earliest readers of gospel material considered it to be the very same type of text as those which commentators have long known circulated in codices—lore, reminiscences, medical tracts, school exercises, magical material, and so forth.⁸⁹ Van Haelst even suggested that the codex form for gospel texts may be related to early notes, a “proto-gospel” that served as the basis for the later, literary gospels that we know from the canon.⁹⁰ The last piece of information, heretofore unremarked upon, is that the earliest readers of gospel traditions considered the text to be precisely “early notes.” These traditions, in the eyes of the earliest readers, lacked literary polish required for the text to be considered its own authored, literary work, apart from the open, fluid, and rhizomatic tradition of “gospel” that found expression both in *commentarii*/ὑπομνήματα and oral traditions.⁹¹

In offering our new reading of the evidence, we follow the common pre-suppositions of scholars detailed above: that the widespread preference for the codex can be explained as a response to a precedent-setting set of circumstances among the earliest circulation of Christian texts. It is all but certain that the earliest texts circulated in codex form, and that later Christian communities continued the practice for all scriptural texts. On our theory, the earliest textualized gospel material circulated on a codex in response to its genre, and the book form stuck, so to speak. While theories like Gamble’s require that the historian gain access to the initial moment of publication for the Pauline letter collection in codex form, our theory explains the ongoing use of the codex instead of the roll in the second century and beyond. That is to say, Gamble’s thesis posits that the preference for the codex form for all of Christianity stems from a *singular* act of publication in codex form. Our theory, on the other hand, explains both why gospel material initially circulated in codex form, and the reason that it continued to do so.

89. Van Haelst, “Les origines du codex,” 13.

90. Van Haelst, “Les origines du codex,” 27.

91. A new fragment of text known from the Gospel according to Mark was announced shortly before this article went to press (P. Oxy. LXXXIII 5345). The fragment comes from a codex (perhaps a single quire) consistent with the small papyrus notebooks common in classical and late antiquity. This fragment from the late second or third century is most likely the earliest witness to the textual tradition that stabilized as the Gospel according to Mark. Its transmission on a small codex notebook rather than a roll corroborates our analysis.

Of course, the collection of Paul's letters must be addressed when discussing the birth of the codex. Unfortunately, a full treatment of Paul's letters and the question of the Christian preference of the codex would require more space than this article allows. The most widely accepted theory for the Christian preference for the codex has been Harry Gamble's, who argues that a Pauline letter collection was collected early on in parchment codices, and served "to establish the codex as the form of the Christian book."⁹² He uses as evidence the fact that the Pauline letters circulated in a specific, non-chronological order in early manuscripts like P46, as well as evidence from 2 Tim 4.13, where members of a Pauline community understand his writings to be recorded in the physical format of *μεμβράναι*.⁹³ He contrasts *μεμβράναι* as "mere notebooks of memorandums," which he sees as the traditional Roman use, with "codices containing actual texts" claiming that the latter preferable.⁹⁴ The binary is false. As we have shown, one need not pick between notebooks or codices. The generic expectations described above hold for both formats.

An additional problem with Gamble's thesis is that other second-century evidence indicates that Paul's letters were also transmitted in the form of rolls; in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, for instance, when a Roman official asks what Speratus has in his *capsa*, he responds "the books and letters of Paul, a just man."⁹⁵ A *capsa* is a circular container for book rolls, as is depicted in the well-known Pompeiian fresco.⁹⁶ This is to say that Pauline letters may have circulated in parchment codices, but the earliest unambiguous evidence actually depicts them as circulating on rolls. Early and widespread evidence for gospel texts, on the other hand, speak of and interact with gospel materials as notebooks. We hold that the codex form of the gospel is likely primary, and that Pauline letter collections experienced a generic format attraction as the two corpora began to be transmitted together.

Our proposal also explains another curious piece of data: why it is that the "Gospel according to Mark" is comparatively rare in second- and

92. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58.

93. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 59.

94. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 64.

95. "Libri et epistolae Pauli viri iusti": *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 12 (Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 86–89).

96. First-century C.E. House of the Banker; *Instrumentum scriptorium* (writing instruments). Wall painting, National archaeological museum of Naples, http://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_10311441895.

third-century manuscripts when seen in relation to manuscripts of the “Gospels according to Matthew, Luke, and John.” If the earliest readers of the Gospel according to Mark did not consider it to be a discrete literary work, but rather as unfinished ὑπομνήματα which referred to a larger set of traditions, then we should not be surprised that fewer manuscripts of it survive than of the other gospel traditions that were considered more “literary,” finished works. Even when basing analysis on the earliest possible paleographical date as listed in the Leuven Database of Ancient Books, it is not until the fifth century that manuscripts of the Gospel according to Mark show up in even rough parity with those of the other three canonical gospels.⁹⁷ (See figures 1 and 2 below.) The most immediate explanation for the dearth of early manuscripts of the Gospel according to Mark,

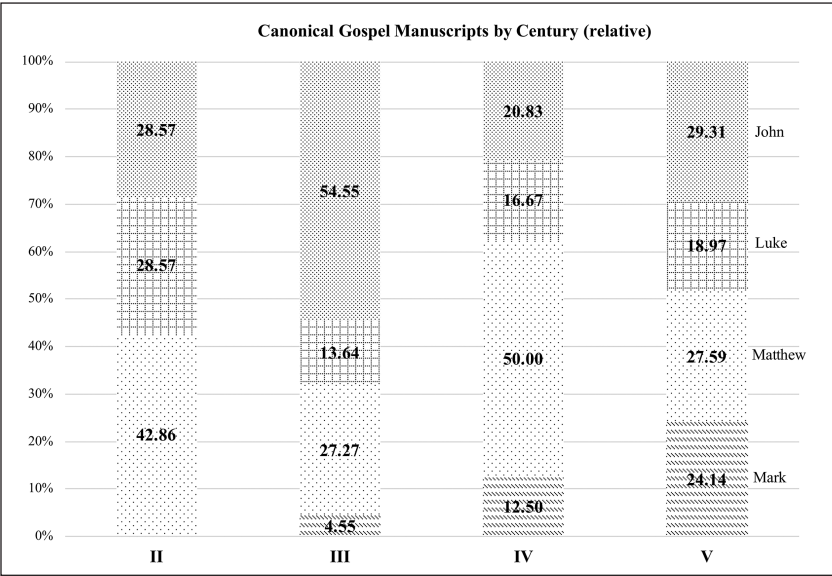


Figure 1. The relative frequency of known canonical gospel manuscripts by century. Dates are according to the earliest possible date in the given range. Information collected from the Leuven Database of Ancient Books on May 7, 2017.

97. On the relative frequencies of gospel manuscripts by century, see also Willy Clarysse, “Christian Literature and History of the Book in Its Larger Context,” in *Language and Culture in Early Christianity: A Companion*, ed. Tim Denecker et al., Orbis Supplementa (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

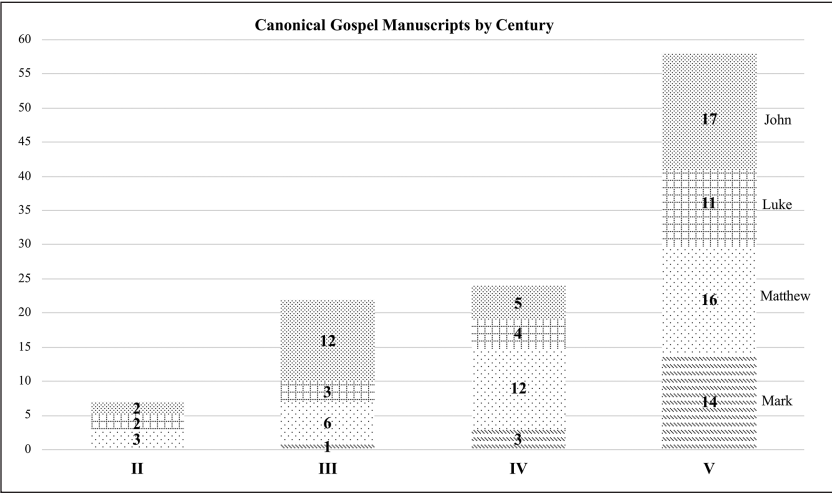


Figure 2. Number of known canonical gospel manuscripts by century. Dates are according to the earliest possible date in the given range. Information collected from the Leuven Database of Ancient Books on May 7, 2017.

given the analysis above, is that it was not until comparatively late that the Gospel according to Mark came into its own in the eyes of a multiplicity of Christians as a distinct, literary work separate from the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke.

Our theory likewise explains another oddity relating to the textual tradition of the Gospel according to Mark, namely that it does not appear as the object of a commentary until remarkably late. While other gospels have formal commentary written about them in the first few centuries C.E., the Gospel according to Mark has *catenae* written in the sixth century and must wait until the eighth century for its first formal, extant commentary.⁹⁸ The comparatively late commentary tradition, as well as the dearth of early manuscripts, is significant because it demonstrates a changing view of the status of the textual tradition of the Gospel according to Mark. It was not considered to be a distinct, “authored” text with its own story and form until comparatively late, and thus it was not transmitted as a separate text or commented upon as a distinct work until significantly

98. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2008), 107–11; Michael Cahill, *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

later than the other canonical gospels. This impression persisted into the fourth century, when Fortunatinus wrote his *Notes on the Gospels* and claimed explicitly to refrain from commenting on Mark's Gospel because it does not differ from what is found in the others.⁹⁹ This phenomenon is also corroborated by the fact that readers into the fifth century regarded the Gospel according to Mark as an abridgement of the Gospel according to Matthew.¹⁰⁰

CONCLUSION

The advantage of our theory over others that have been suggested is that it does not in any way rely on speculation as to the practicality of the codex over the roll or the need for multiple texts to be bound together for theological or practical purposes. We can explain the Christian preference for the codex solely on generic grounds. Of course, our theory does not invalidate Gamble's, Gascou's, Roberts's, Skeat's, et alia. The widespread Christian preference for the codex form may well be the result of a confluence of factors among different Christian communities, including the collation of a Pauline letter collection, the practicality of a codex over the roll, or the desire to bind more than one gospel text together. It is unlikely that one theory will answer the question we have asked because the question is our own, and seemingly not one emic to the earliest centuries C.E. There will be a multiplicity of answers because there is a multiplicity of Christianities. Minimally, our theory adds to the pile; maximally, it does away with the need for other explanations. The difference is that our explanation finds its data in the explicit reading practices of ancient users of gospel texts.

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99. *Commentarii in Evangelia* 752–55 (CSEL 103:142).

100. Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.2.4. See Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013): 17–19.