The New Testament in the Light of Book Publishing in Antiquity

David Trobisch

1. The Christian Bible as a Second-Century Publication

The student of the manuscript tradition of New Testament texts will discover that the extant manuscripts document a closed selection of twenty-seven writings, that the writings are arranged in the same sequence and grouped into four volumes, that they display uniform titles with very few variants, that they were produced almost exclusively using the form of the codex, and that they contain a unique system to mark sacred terms, the so-called *nomina sacra*.[1]

All of these elements—the notation of the *nomina sacra*, the codex form, the uniform arrangement and number of writings, the formulation of the titles, and the evidence indicating that the collection was called "New Testament" from the very beginning—indicate that the New Testament is a carefully edited publication; it is not the product of a gradual process which lasted for centuries.[2] These editorial features, which did not originate with the authors of the individual writings, serve to combine disparate material into a cohesive literary unit. Furthermore, these elements

1. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. The assumption of gradual growth has dominated traditional studies of the history of the canon. These studies usually do not take the Greek manuscript evidence into account, but rely heavily on quotes from early Christian writers. See, for instance, Hans von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (BHT 39; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968) = *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

cannot be credited to several independently operating editors, but must be the work of a single editorial entity. In other words, the New Testament was edited and published by specific people at a very specific time and at a very specific place. Because the first documented readers of the New Testament are Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tatian, Tertullian, and Origen, all of whom wrote at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century, the New Testament must have been published before 180 C.E.[3] Seeking to understand and interpret the New Testament as a publication of the second century is a promising field of study. In the following I will touch on some aspects of ancient book publishing that seem of interest.

2. Aspects of Book Publishing in Antiquity

In the year 20 B.C.E. Horace published a collection of twenty of his letters in Rome. These letters were written as poems. The last letter of the collection was addressed to the book that Horace was just about to finish. In the very first sentence Horace mentions the address and the name of the publisher who would produce and distribute the letter collection: the Sosii brothers. Their business was located conveniently next to the temples of Janus and Vertumnus (*Ep.* 1.20):

> The bookshops by Janus' temple and that of Vertumnus—
> That's the direction you seem to be casting your eyes in,
> Hoping, no doubt, my book, to stand there on sale,
> Neatly scrubbed with the pumice of Sosii Brothers.[4]

---

3. Irenaeus uses the term *New Testament* repeatedly, but he does not use it in reference to the book; see W. C. van Unnik, "*Hē kainē diathēkē*—A Problem in the Early History of the Canon," *Studia Patristica* 4 (1961): 212–27, here 219–20; Adolf von Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1889), 42; Hermann-Josef Vogt, "Die Geltung des Alten Testaments bei Irenäus von Lyon," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 160 (Munich: Wewel, 1980): 17–28; Josef Hoh, *Die Lehre des Hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament*, (Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen; 7 Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1919). Concerning the use of the term *New Testament* in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.29.2–3, see Joseph Fischer, "Die Einheit der beiden Testamente bei Laktanz, Viktorin von Pettau und deren Quellen," *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1950): 96–101, cf. 100; van Unnik, "*Hē kainē diathēkē*," 215. For Tertullian's use of the term *New Testament* in *Pud.* 1 and *Prax.* 15 and Origen's *Comm. Jo.* 5.8, see Trobisch, *First Edition*, 44.

4. Lord Dunsany and Michael Oakley, *The Collected Works of Horace* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1961), 265.

Another Roman publisher of the first century B.C.E. whom we know by name was Atticus. He published the works of his close friend Cicero, and was also praised for his excellent editions of Plato, Aeschines, and Demosthenes.[5] In the first century C.E., Typhon published Quintilian's and Martial's works. Martial names Quintus Pollius Valerianus as his publisher.[6] Dorus and Polybius, a former slave of Emperor Claudius and a friend of the philosopher Seneca, were two other documented publishers at the time.[7] The oldest Christian publisher known by name was probably a certain Clement. In the *Shepherd of Hermas* 8.3, his duty is described as producing copies of the master manuscript and distributing those copies by sending them to other cities. In other words, his work was to "produce or release for distribution"— the definition of the word "publisher" in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

The value of a copy was entirely dependent on the quality of the master copy. A publisher had two possibilities for securing quality. For contemporary works, the publisher would cooperate closely with the author. But with older pieces of literature, the publisher would work with well known and highly recognized editors. Both publisher and author were interested in controlling the quality of the master copy. The correspondence between Cicero and his publisher Atticus gives us valuable insights into how far this cooperation sometimes reached. After Cicero had sent a master copy of his *Academica* to Atticus, he made substantial changes. Unfortunately, Atticus had already produced copies and was ready to distribute and sell the books. Atticus decided to destroy the finished copies; for him they had become worthless.[8] In another case Cicero confused the names of two comedy writers, Eupolis and Aristophanes. He felt so badly about this mistake that he not only asked Atticus to correct the master copy, but insisted that his publisher send scribes to the customers who had purchased the book to correct the mistake.[9]

5. Wilhelm Schubart, *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern* (2nd ed.; Berlin, Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1921), 154, 188.

6. Martial distinguishes between his publishers and the bookshops that carry his books. He mentions Atrectus and Secundus, who manage a store behind the Temple of Peace (Martial, *Epigrams* 1.117; 13.3).

7. Eduard Stemplinger, *Buchhandel im Altertum* (2nd ed.; Munich: Heimeran, 1933), 11.

8. Cicero, *Att.* 16.6.4; Schubart, *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern*, 151.

9. Cicero, *Att.* 12.6.3; Schubart, *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern*, 154. Martial (*Epigrams* 1.117) revises the master copy that he had submitted to his pub-

But how would a publisher successfully compete with other publishers when the works were written by authors who were no longer living? In this case the quality of the master copy was guaranteed by the person who edited the work. Atticus, for example, not only published the works of his friend Cicero, but very successfully produced and sold editions of Plato, Aeschines, and Demosthenes. For centuries the editions by Atticus were well known and in high demand.[10] Overall it was the claim that the master copy was authentic and without mistakes that guaranteed the copyright. If the master copy contained the author's handwriting, the value was enormous. Aulus Gellius reports that Plato paid a sum of 10,000 *denarii* for three books that had been copied by Philolaos; and Aristotle, he says, paid 18,000 *denarii* for books copied by the hand of Seusippos, the nephew of Plato. To put these prices into perspective, Martial mentions that one of his books sold for one *denarius*, another for five *denarii*.[11]

But an autograph does not always make a good master copy. It seems that Aristotle edited his own writings and authorized master copies for publication. Two hundred and fifty years after Aristotle's death, books surfaced in Rome that showed additions by Aristotle's hand in the margins. These manuscripts came from the library of Apellicon of Teos, which Sulla had stolen and carried off as war bounty. They were Aristotle's personal copies, from which he very likely read during his lectures, noting ideas in an abbreviated format that was difficult for anyone but the author to understand. The Roman publishers struggled to edit these books for publication, and in the end they produced a text full of repetitions and discrepancies. Nevertheless, these editions sold so well that they completely replaced the older versions, which had been edited by Aristotle himself.[12]

But how would a publisher secure the copyright? Horace's letter to his book ends with the following sentences (*Ep.* 1.20):

---

lisher. Cf. Plinius, *Ep.*, 5.10; in his letter to Sueton, Plinius writes about works being copied, widely read, and sold.

10. Schubart, *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern*, 154, 188.

11. Ibid., 188.

12. Dieter Georgi, "Die Aristoteles—und Theophrastausgabe des Andronikus von Rhodus: Ein Beitrag zur Kanonsproblematik," in *Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Klaus Baltzer zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Rüdiger Bartelmus et al.; OBO 126; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 45–78, here 52.

> Talk to people about me.... Say I was short in build,
> Went grey early in life, was fond of the sunshine,
> Was quick to get angry, though just as quickly appeased;
> And if anyone happens to ask my age, you can tell them
> I finished my four-and-fortieth December the year
> That Lollius the consul got Lepidus named as his colleague.[13]

These words clearly identify the author of the book and give a date of publication, something everyone expects to find on the cover page of a publication.

The first century poet Martial begins his book of epigrams (1.2) with the following note to the readers:

> You, who wish my poems should go with you wherever you go ... go and buy them! ... And so you may not fail to know where I am for sale, or wander aimlessly all over town, accept my guidance and you will find your way: Seek out Secundus, the freedman of learned Lucensis, behind the entrance to the Temple of Peace and the Forum of Pallas.[14]

Martial gives the name and the address of his publisher. In other places he even mentions the price of the respective books. From the publisher's perspective these comments by an author secure his copyright, because the author endorses the publisher's master copy. Signals indicating that a book was published from an autograph were important to book sellers and readers alike. They were perceived as signs of high quality and most likely justified a higher sales price.

3. Application to the New Testament

The New Testament contains features that link the publication to autographs. The *Third Letter of John*, of which Philipp Vielhauer wrote in his Introduction to the New Testament, "This writing is a private letter—the only real one in the NT,"[15] seems a rather trivial piece of communication. The letter writer complains to Gaius that some of his friends had

13. Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica* (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

14. Martial, *Epigrams* (trans. W. C. A. Ker; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919).

15. Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das*

not been welcome by Gaius' congregation. He criticizes Diotrephes, one of the leaders of that congregation, and supports a certain Demetrius as a better leader. Equally, Paul's letter to Philemon seems to contain a rather insignificant message compared to Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians and his Corinthian correspondence, which were published in the same volume. In the second century, however, Paul's letter to Philemon had the potential to promote the New Testament like few other New Testament writings. A potential reader was probably familiar with Bishop Polycarp's edition of the letters of Ignatius, which was published during the first decades of the second century, and in which a certain Onesimus is mentioned as being the bishop of Ephesus (Ignatius, *Eph.* 1.3ff.). This is the same Onesimus, a reader might conclude, about whom Paul talks in his letter to Philemon, the runaway slave who found grace in the eyes of his master Philemon through the intervention of the apostle Paul. The letter to Philemon, from a publisher's point of view, provided prominent support for this publication.

Paul's seemingly trivial remark at the end of Galatians ("See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand," Gal 6:11) tells the readers that the edition is based on autographs. Numerous letters of Paul (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, Philemon) explicitly contain autographic subscriptions which convey to the reader that the publisher's master copy is based on originals. The end of 2 Thessalonians reads: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine: this is how I write (*houtōs graphō*)" (2 Thess 3:17). This passage suggests that the publishers based their edition exclusively on Pauline autographs: "This is the mark in *every* letter."

A copy of the Christian Bible came at a price. The title "New Testament," which seems to be transmitted in the manuscripts without significant variants, links the New Testament to the "Old Testament." Both collections were supposed to be read together. They formed one literary unit. The Old Testament presents itself as a Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures, closely related to the Septuagint, but not identical with it. The book of Daniel, for example, was taken from Theodotion's translation, and the introduction of *nomina sacra* clearly distinguishes the Christian Bible

---

Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter (2nd ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978), 477, my translation.

from contemporary Jewish Scriptures. The publication of the Old and the New Testaments as a literary venture was an ambitious project with significant production costs.

The New Testament itself conveys to its readers that religious literature does not come without a price. Acts 19:19 describes a revival in Ephesus: "A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins." In 1912 the German Bible Society published an annotated edition of Luther's German translation to celebrate the Society's one hundredth anniversary. The German editors commented on the passage as follows:

> They were so serious about their new Christian faith that they forwarded their books of magic and burned them, although their worth exceeded 35.000 German Marks. —It would be highly desirable for certain book distributors and modern authors to consider this option and to follow such a noble example.[16]

Bible Societies were aware of the costs involved and the price of Christian Bibles. The Christian Bible faced strong competition. Anyone who was interested in buying a book of the same general genre as the Christian Bible had several alternative publications to choose from. Competing with the "Old Testament" were the Septuagint and the edition of Theodotion of Ephesus mentioned above. Then there was the edition of Aquila, who according to legend was a distant relative of Emperor Hadrian and who became a Christian but then converted to Judaism.[17]

Competing with the New Testament was Marcion's Bible. Marcion, thought to be the son of a Pontic bishop, had moved to Rome sometime in the first half of the second century and had published a collection of Christian writings consisting of one Gospel and ten letters of Paul. From 135 C.E. on Valentinus, a representative of the Christian gnostic movement, lived in Rome. He is reported to have published a so-called *Gospel of Truth*. Sometime around or after 150 C.E., Tatian, a student of Justin, lived in Rome and had made a single Gospel out of the four canonical

16. *Stuttgarter Jubiläumsbibel mit erklärenden Anmerkungen* (Stuttgart: Privileg. Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1912), my translation.

17. Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (rev. R. R. Ottley; New York: Ktav, 1968), 49–50.

Gospels, the so-called *Diatessaron*. This edition became a strong competitor to the New Testament in the Syriac church. A well-informed Roman bookseller probably also kept copies of Papias's five-volume work in stock as well. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, collected unpublished material on Jesus, because, as he said, "I am convinced, what you know from books is not nearly as helpful as what survived in the living oral tradition to this very day" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4).

If the Old and New Testament had strong competitors during the middle of the second century, what distinguishes the edition of the two testaments from their competition? Whereas the New Testament writings carried the names of early followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the competing editions were published under the name of their editors: "the Seventy," Tatian, Valentinus, Marcion, Aquila, and Theodotion. By the end of the century, Tertullian, one of the first documented readers of the New Testament, sums up these authorial signals as he discusses Marcion's edition:

> So we must pull away at the rope of contention, swaying with equal effort to the one side or the other. I say that mine is true: Marcion makes that claim for his. I say that Marcion's is falsified: Marcion says the same of mine. Who shall decide between us? Only such a reckoning of dates, as will assume that authority belongs to that which is found to be older, and will prejudge as corrupt that which is convicted to having come later.[18]

Because the Christian Bible did not convey the name of its editor or editors, it conveyed to readers like Tertullian that it was older.

4. Contemporary Editions of the Christian Bible

The Christian Bible is probably the most heavily edited work of Western literary culture. There is not one sentence of the New Testament that has exactly the same wording in each of the manuscripts. The editorial problems that had to be solved in the second century were significant. I only touched on a few challenges: using the codex form, introducing the *nomina sacra*, organizing the books into volumes, designing the titles,

18. *Marc.* 4.4.1–2; Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* (ed. Ernest Evans; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 267; cf. 4.5.1; *Praescr.* 21–22; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.4.3; R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 68.

signaling to the readers that the edition was based on autographs, and featuring authors over editors in order to be successful in the competitive religious market of the time.

A modern edition of the New Testament should reflect the Greek text of the first edition. Much critical work has been done in an attempt to establish the wording of the oldest documented text. In addition, a modern edition should reflect the redactional frame of this carefully designed work. With this goal in mind, I propose several changes.[19]

(1) Modern printed editions should preserve the four literary units of the New Testament: the Four-Gospel-Book, the *Praxapostolos*, the fourteen Letters of Paul and the Revelation of John, by noting them in the table of contents or giving them four separate title sheets. It seems especially important not to separate Acts from the General Letters, and to include the Letter to the Hebrews after 2 Thessalonians, where it is found in the vast majority of manuscripts before the eighth century.

(2) It seems appropriate to start out with the Four-Gospel-Book, followed by the *Praxapostolos* to honour the close connection between Luke and Acts, followed by the Letters of Paul and the Revelation of John with its concluding remarks (Rev 22:18–22). The present arrangement of inserting the Pauline letters between Acts and the Letter of James misrepresents the oldest manuscript tradition.

(3) Nothing could create a better sense for the whole of the Christian Bible than an edition of the Greek Old and New Testament following the same editorial guidelines, containing the same abbreviations, and using the same apparatus design and critical marks.

(4) Furthermore, it should be taken seriously that the Christian Old Testament differs from the Hebrew Bible and the Hellenistic-Jewish Septuagint. Often this difference is not addressed and not adequately reflected in today's academic practice. An obvious difference from the Hebrew Bible is that the Christian Old Testament contains more writings, which are included without negative bias. That the Old Testament is at best an edited version of the Septuagint, and differs from it in significant ways, was pointed out above. It is not my intention to reduce the academic and theological value of the Hebrew Bible for scholarly studies, but it must be acknowledged that the Masoretic edition does not represent the edition

19. See Trobisch, *First Edition*, 102–5.

used by early Christians.[20] The objective of scholarly engagement with religious traditions must be to understand and interpret the different editions in the context of the different faith communities and acknowledge the historical fact that the Jewish Scriptures have a twofold *Wirkungsgeschichte*, both Jewish and Christian.[21]

(5) Finally, for more than thirteen centuries, the *nomina sacra* formed a characteristic redactional element of the Christian Bible. I propose that modern editions should preserve this old tradition and represent the *nomina sacra*. They are a significant feature of the first edition of the Christian Bible and do not obstruct the reading process. At least the four generally noted terms: *kyrios*, *theos*, *iēsous*, and *christos* should be reintroduced into printed editions of the Greek text.

20. Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 18; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950).

21. Rolf Rendtorff, "Zur Bedeutung des Kanons für eine Theologie des Alten Testaments," in *"Wenn nicht jetzt, wann dann?" Aufsätze für Hans-Joachim Kraus zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. H.-G. Geyer; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 1983), 11.