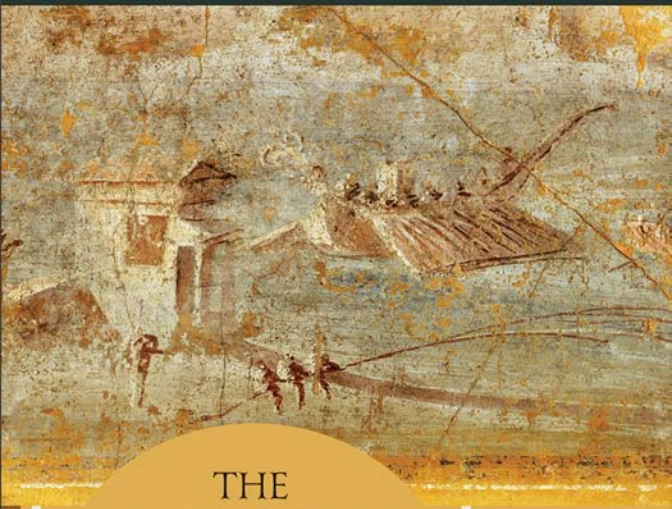

THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts

JOEL B. GREEN
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PART 4

THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Because the majority of the surviving ancient artifacts of early Christianity are literary documents, it is important to ask questions about the nature and transmission of those artifacts and to acknowledge parallels with other literature of the same period.

Early Christianity emerged within a social and literary context that was influential on the writings that would eventually be recognized as the NT. Consequently, we ought to inquire into the usual writing practices, genres, and materials in antiquity, and to explore how they might have influenced the NT writers. What did writing materials cost? How were manuscripts carried from place to place?

Christianity emerged on Palestinian soil in the first-century Greco-Roman world. We rightly anticipate Jewish, Roman, and Greek influence in the NT writings, including dependence here and there in terms of literary forms, turns of phrase, a common "dictionary," and so on. And, of course, literature from antiquity helps

to fill in social, political, economic, and religious background—much of which is simply taken for granted in the NT materials. For example, did the works of Homer influence the writers of the NT, whether consciously or otherwise? Since Homer was at the core of the educational system in antiquity, with schoolchildren regularly taught to read and recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, one might expect that those who were converted to the Christian faith on Hellenistic soil would also be well acquainted with these works and even show occasional familiarity with them.

Likewise, contemporary Jewish writings offer much to the NT interpreter. What can we learn from Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher? What of Josephus, the noted Jewish historian who writes about the history of the Jewish people and even names persons known to us from the NT (John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, and even Jesus himself)? Without Josephus we would know very little about the Herodians, Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots, not to mention the various social and political circumstances before, during, and after the time of Jesus. In the rabbinic tradition, much of which postdates the NT period, readers will also find valuable information on the context of early Christianity and some passages in the NT, and they may wonder about the relationship of the NT materials to other early Christian writings.

Finally, an interesting and often-challenging subject for NT students is the ancient practice of writing documents in someone else's name. We call this "pseudonymous" writing and refer to such texts as "pseudepigraphic." In our period, the names associated with such writings are generally those of famous prophets and apostles. For NT study, the pressing question is often whether pseudonymous writings have been included in the Bible. Scholars have debated this matter at length without any consensus, except to agree that this kind of writing was well known in early Judaism and early Christianity, most of it from the second century BC to the third century AD. Some writings in the NT were anonymously written (e.g., the Gospels, Hebrews), and other NT writings have had serious questions raised about their authorship, especially the Pastoral Epistles, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, Ephesians, and Colossians.

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Reading, Writing, and Manuscripts

E. RANDOLPH RICHARDS

Reading someone else's mail" is a phrase commonly used by NT professors to remind students of the challenges of exegeting NT letters. Ours is a faith firmly grounded in written texts; thus, it is appropriate to examine how documents were made in the first-century AD Mediterranean world. Most ancient documents were written on perishable materials. Papyrus needed to stay constantly dry, while wooden tablets needed to be constantly waterlogged. Thus, most everyday documents survived only in a few (and usually less hospitable) places in the ancient world where the climate has remained optimal for the last two thousand years, such as the deserts of Egypt and the bogs of England. In such places we have found many documents from the NT world. For example, a traveler wrote home: "Artemis to Socrates, greeting. Before all else I pray for your health. I arrived in the city on the 9th" (P.Mich. 8.507).[1] Although this is only a brief note, the recipient kept the letter.

Reading and Writing

It would seem tautological to say that if you are reading this chapter, then you can read. In antiquity it was trickier. The "readers" of a Gospel would more correctly

1. Herbert Chayyim Youtie and John Garrett Winter, eds., *Papyri and Ostraca from Karanis* (2nd series; Michigan Papyri 8; London: Oxford University Press, 1951).

be called the "hearers." In antiquity, reading was done aloud. James cautions his church to be doers and not merely *hearers* (James 1:22–25). The parenthetical remark "Let the reader understand" (Matt. 24:15) was a word of caution to the one reading aloud the passage. The material was politically sensitive: be careful who might overhear. For a church to hear a Gospel or letter, only one reader was needed. In some situations, the person who delivered it was expected to read it aloud, as was likely the case with Tychicus (Col. 4:7).

Reading as Oral Performance

If you have ever been asked to read a passage aloud in church, you know that a good reading requires a bit of practice. In antiquity, since words and sentences were written without spaces between them (*scriptio continua*) and split at the end of a line of text often without regard to syllables, reading was more difficult. Ancients also valued oral rhetoric. Saying something well included cadence in speech, good pronunciation, and intonation. Pliny the Elder, himself a skilled orator, had a slave (*lector*) whose task was to read to him (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 3.5; B. Radice, LCL). Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 8.1) laments at length the temporary loss of his reader. Most people did not have a trained *lector*, but performing a document (reading aloud) was important (Col. 4:16). Letters were written from the viewpoint of when it would be read; thus, Paul wrote "I sent him" (*epempsa*), which we translate "I am sending him" (Phil. 2:28). When a worried mother heard the letter from her son "Apollinarius to Taesion, his mother, many greetings" (P.Mich. 8.490), at that moment her son greeted her.

People in the NT world read aloud even when alone. Augustine was surprised by Ambrose's silent reading of the text (*Conf.* 6.3.3; W. Watts and W. H. D. Rouse, LCL). Michael Slusser, building on the landmark work of Paul Achtemeier,[2] has argued that reading a text was aurally, not visually, interacting with the text.[3] Reading privately was still reading aloud. Thus, "Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet" (Acts 8:30 NIV).

Writing as Calligraphy

From *Webster's* to Wikipedia, literacy has been defined as "the ability to read and write." In fact, in our modern society, these terms are so connected that we often see the expression "reading/writing" as if they are merely two sides of the same coin. In the NT world, literacy was the ability to *read*. Writing was a practiced skill, much like the modern art of calligraphy. Since we were taught to write at the same time we were taught to read, this often surprises us. Let me illustrate. My professor wrote out his books by hand, and a secretary typed them. He was

2. Paul Achtemeier, "*Omne verbum sonat:* The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990): 3–27.

3. Michael Slusser, "Reading Silently in Antiquity," *JBL* 111 (1992): 499.

quite literate, but he did not know how to type (other than pecking out the letters one by one). The ability to read a typed book did not mean one could type. Handwriting is the same issue. It is a matter of practice. Put your pen in your opposite hand. How well do you write? For me, suddenly I write slowly with large, clumsy letters, because I rarely write with my left hand. Likewise, when Paul states, "See what large letters I make" (Gal. 6:11), we should not read anything unusual into this. Like most letter writers of his day, he used a secretary. Someone who could read probably was able to scratch out letters (write), but we are suggesting that even a literate person might handwrite poorly and only with much labor. Thus, by literate, we mean someone who could read.

Literacy Rates

Although the NT world circulated and stored lots of written documents, we are not suggesting even that most people could read. When modern tourists visit ancient Ephesus, they see scratched into the pavement of the main road from the harbor the picture visually indicating the direction to the local brothel. Likewise, tourists are amused if not scandalized by the "menu" of services painted on the walls of brothels in Pompeii. Like a modern fast-food restaurant, a visual menu helps those who cannot read or who read poorly to order what they wish. When sailors arrived in a port, such as Ostia, the mosaic pictures in front of each local trade guild announced the business. Rome also understood that propaganda must be communicated to be effective. Titus's sestertius coin has an image of the goddess Eirene ("peace") with an olive branch in her right hand and holding a cornucopia in her left to remind everyone that Roman peace brought prosperity. The Roman promise was clear even to those who could not read.

In addition to comments in the literature from antiquity, ancient documents also help us to assess literacy rates. "Inscriptions" commonly refers to writings carved into stone. Yet, we cannot assume that the presence of an inscription indicates a literate audience. Putting something in stone (then and now) had other purposes. Manuscripts, though, do seem to expect a subsequent reader. A "manuscript" in the technical sense refers to a document written by hand (*manu*). As suggested above, we cannot judge literacy rates merely by comparing handwriting and assuming that those with poor handwriting were only marginally literate.

It seems best to assume that there was not a widespread public education system in the NT world (so Gamble, *Books*, 7). Yet we should not be too skeptical. Graffiti in Pompeii shows that at least some soldiers, weavers, and barmaids were able to write (marginally) and expected at least some fellow patrons to be able to read.

Alan Millard argues that Jewish men were taught to read at least Scripture for synagogue services (Millard, *Reading*, 157), citing Simon ben Shetah (100 BC), who commanded all (Israelite) children to attend school (*y. Ketub.* 8.32c), as well as the remarks of Philo (*Legat.* 210; F. H. Colson, LCL) and Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 2.178; H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL). Jesus seemed to be expected to be able to read (Luke

Graffiti in Pompeii

Scratched on the wall of a bar is the plight of two men (Successus and Severus) who both loved a barmaid (Iris):

> [Severus]: "Successus, a weaver, loves the innkeeper's slave girl named Iris. She, however, does not love him. Still, he begs her to have pity on him. His rival wrote this. Goodbye."
> [Answer by Successus]: "Envious one, why do you get in the way? Submit to a handsomer man and one who is being treated very wrongly and good looking."
> [Answer by Severus]: "I have spoken. I have written all there is to say. You love Iris, but she does not love you." (*CIL* 4:8258; 4:8259)

On the wall of the gladiators' barracks we find graffiti even more lurid than this one: "Floronius, privileged soldier of the 7th legion, was here. The women did not know of his presence. Only six women came to know, too few for such a stallion" (*CIL* 4:8767). Scratched on walls of offices and elsewhere, we likewise read of broken hearts: "Secundus says hello to his Prima, wherever she is. I ask, my mistress, that you love me" (*CIL* 4:8364); "Cruel Lalagus, why do you not love me?" (*CIL* 4:3042). Finally, some messages are heartwarming: "I don't want to sell my husband, not for all the gold in the world" (*CIL* 4:3061).

4:16–17), or it was already known that he could. Also, papyrus letters in Egypt show some marginal literacy by a wide assortment of people. Since handwriting could be used to determine authenticity (2 Thess. 3:17), a letter sender who could write even a little would take up the pen to "sign" any final comments. When the sender wished to point it out, a comment such as Paul's was typical: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (1 Cor. 16:21; cf. Gal. 6:11; Philem. 19; see also Cicero, *Q. Fr.* 2.2.1; 2.16; 3.1; W. A. Falconer, LCL). Therefore, many people could probably read their own signature or perhaps a few very basic words, but we must admit that to read a lengthy text fairly quickly and with understanding was probably beyond the skill of most people.

Although determining literacy in antiquity has challenges, some reasonable estimates have been made. The prevailing opinion suggests that 10 percent of the Mediterranean population could read with any proficiency. Literacy was not, though, evenly distributed across the empire. Moreover, in the NT a literate person might read Aramaic fluently, Hebrew slowly, and Greek with difficulty and be unable to read Latin at all.

While Millard may be correct that Jewish men had a higher literacy rate, we would not want to suggest that more than 15 percent could read, and even that percentage is probably too high. Although we may be discouraged by such a low number, it does indicate that the ability to read was not uncommon. Thus, Millard (*Reading*, 158) is likely correct that it is significant that Jesus introduces Scripture

with the words "Have you not *read*?" when speaking to Pharisees (Matt. 12:3), to Sadducees (Matt. 22:31), to scribes (Matt. 21:16), or to a lawyer (Luke 10:26), but says to the crowd, "You have *heard* that it was said" (Matt. 5:21).

Literacy and the Use of Both Oral and Written Material

Conventional wisdom suggests that people in Jesus' day preferred oral sources. It seems likely that early Christians enjoyed hearing from an eyewitness (Luke 1:2). Greek historians argued that a firsthand account was preferred. Nonetheless, the difference between oral and written material was less distinct in antiquity. The written material was still read aloud and heard by the audience (even if an audience of one).

Some of our best sources of information are the ultra-elite aristocracy of Rome, particularly Cicero, who wrote about all manner of mundane matters. Obviously, there are challenges in making comparisons to the practices of NT characters. One should not assume the same quality or resources. Pliny had a *lector;* Caesar wrote while riding in a litter or on a ship; Cicero had slaves merely for carrying letters; they all held lavish dinner parties with other aristocracy. None of these excesses are analogous to the NT. Nevertheless, the basic social structures underneath these extravagances are likely the same. For example, someone read the letter to others; documents could be written while away from home; letter carriers were used (Col. 4:7–9); Corinthian Christians also held dinner parties with apparently the same vices as aristocratic dinners, including dinner "escorts" (1 Cor. 6), idol meat (1 Cor. 8–10), immorality (1 Cor. 10), and drunkenness (1 Cor. 11).

The Multilingual New Testament World

A tablet contains an official request (in Latin) for two sons to be registered. The father (a Roman citizen) writes the subscription in his own hand but must write it in Greek since apparently he cannot write Latin (nor probably speak it). He notes that he is actually writing the subscription on behalf of the children's mother "because she did not know letters" (Winter, *Life*, 54–55).

Scholars are now examining more closely these dinner parties. When philosophers traveled from town to town, a patron (or often a widowed patroness) would host them in his or her home. The guest was expected to reciprocate by "entertaining" the others after dinner, usually sharing philosophical thoughts (e.g., Plutarch, *Caes.* 63.4; B. Perrin, LCL). Early apostles probably used this system for propagating the Christian message. Cicero, although gifted in oratory, often read from a current project. A guest who enjoyed it would ask for a copy, a request Cicero was evidently quick to grant (Cicero, *Att.* 8.9; E. O. Winstead, LCL). Harry Gamble suggests this model to explain the spread of Paul's Letters (Gamble, *Canon*, 36–43).

Reading, Writing, and the Study of the New Testament

A comment like Paul's in Col. 4:16—"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (NIV)—should not surprise us. Writings were valued and shared. For example, Brutus mentions to Cicero, "I have read the short extract from the note you sent to Octavius. Atticus sent it to me" (Cicero, *Br.* 1.16.1; also see P.Zen. 10).

Early Christians received and handed on tradition (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). Presumably, the illiterate majority did so orally, but scholars have suggested that notes and other written memoirs played a role in the NT world. It is not preposterous to assume that some of Jesus' hearers took notes. Collections of sayings and parables circulated (Luke 1:1 mentions "many").

It is also reasonable that NT writers took care with the appearance of the documents. A Gospel written to a benefactor (Luke 1:3) or a letter to a church intended to be read publicly (Col. 4:16) would not be scratched messily across some sheet. Ancients had a sense of propriety. For an important letter, Cicero had the final copy prepared on fine, large sheets of papyrus (*macrocolla*) in careful script (see Cicero, *Att*. 13.25; 13.21a).

Biblically Literate

The phrase "biblically literate" often refers to how well one knows the biblical stories, whether from an oral or a written source. First Peter (3:6) seems to know the stories of Abraham from the popular *Testament of Abraham* (where Sarah calls him "lord" five times) and not from the Genesis narrative (where she does not). Similarly, most Christians today know the story of Noah's ark, not from reading Gen. 6 but from hearing (or seeing) popular retellings, and thus have never read Gen. 6:1–4. We should not assume that NT writers knew *all* the biblical stories nor necessarily knew them from the Tanak (i.e., the HB), and we should also not be surprised when they refer to later versions (Jude 9; 2 Tim. 3:8).

The Making of Manuscripts

The basic technology for the nib pen has been the same from NT times until today. Reeds were later replaced by quill pens, which were cut from feathers and drew finer lines. In NT times, the preferred pen (*calamus*) was the sea rush (*juncus maritimus*, a small coastal reed), which was cut about eight to ten inches long and had a split tip; it was stiff but easy to cut and cheap. A red ink mixed from ochre, gelatin, gum, and beeswax was sometimes used, but Greeks and Romans commonly used a black ink from mixing lamp black (or ground charcoal) with gum Arabic (or an animal glue). Sometimes cuttlefish ink or wine dregs were used to enhance the color. Ancients liked the basic carbon ink because it was cheap and easy to make and did not fade. Ink did wash off with water, though, which

28.1. Modern reproduction of a writing palette and reed pen.

is how it was erased. Unfortunately, an accidental soaking also caused many an ancient letter to be "lost" (Cicero, *Q. Fr.* 2.12.4).

Greeks and Romans wrote in lines from left to right, writing the letters pendant, hanging from the line. (We write our letters on top of the line.) The typical sheet, *pagina*, for purchase was a bit smaller than the standard American page and slightly less wide, depending on the quality: *augusta* sheets were thirteen digits wide (about ten inches), while *emporetica* sheets were about six digits wide (nearly five inches). In more formal writing, narrow columns were used, so that less of the scroll had to be unrolled for reading. Each line (Greek *stichos*) was about thirty-six letters, or about three inches long. In fact, copyists charged by the number of lines, or *stichoi*. The average sheet held three to four columns of usually thirty to forty lines (rows) of text, with a half-inch space between columns and wider top and bottom margins. In shorter letters or less-polished documents, the scribe often wrote nearly edge to edge, apparently more concerned with maximizing space than following convention.

Categorizing the Materials

While pen and ink remained largely unchanged, the NT world was experiencing a plethora of new writing materials. (The Chinese invented paper about AD 100, but it took over a thousand years to enter the Mediterranean world.) Ancients wrote on just about anything—walls, pavements, bar counters, and in the dirt (John 8:6). Some materials, though, were just better suited for writing. Availability, price, and the characteristics of the material often determined which was chosen.

Ostraca. Clay pots were cheap but fragile. Most kitchen floors were littered with fragments. These broken shards, called "ostraca," provided a great surface for short, quick notes. Although the glazed side would not hold ink, the unglazed surface was smooth enough and neutrally colored and held ink well. Thus, on an ostracon we commonly find a receipt, vote, invitation, prescription, prayer, or student's exercises. By their very nature, ostraca had no standard size.

Tablets. While ostraca were great for jotting a quick note, they were small, clunky, and not really erasable and thus not reusable. For notes, drafts, lessons, and especially temporary documents, tablets (*tabula*) were preferred. Leaf

Blotted from the Book of Life

Ancient writers usually sat cross-legged. Their tunic was stretched taut between their knees, making a desk of sorts. Desks were not used until several centuries after the NT. A short block of wood with a hollowed inkwell (*atramentarium*) and a slot for holding reeds was held in one hand and the reed pen in the other. Scribes commonly tied a wet cloth on a string to their palette for erasing, which they termed "blotting out." This practice is referred to in Rev. 3:5: "I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life" (NIV).

tablets, very thinly cut sheets of birch or alder sapling, were used (Cassiodorus, *Variae* 11.38).[4] These sheets were lightweight and adequately durable and could even be folded. Since these were highly perishable, it is possible that leaf notebooks were far more popular than the few surviving examples (from Vindolanda, a Roman fort in northern England) might imply. Nonetheless, the common tablet (judging from remains) was a thin wooden tablet, incised to create a recessed middle with a raised outer border. Tablets were generally made the size of a sheet, or *pagina*. Sometimes ancients wrote directly on the wood, such as found on tablets recovered at Vindolanda. More commonly, the middle was covered in a thin layer of colored wax. The raised rim protected the wax when tablets were stacked.

For wax tablets, the stylus was often bronze or iron with a point. Since one was scratching lightly into the surface of the wax, the verb *exarare* ("to plough") was used for writing and often is translated "jotting" to reflect that tablets were commonly used for notes. The opposite end of the stylus was often rounded or flat to erase by smoothing out the wax.

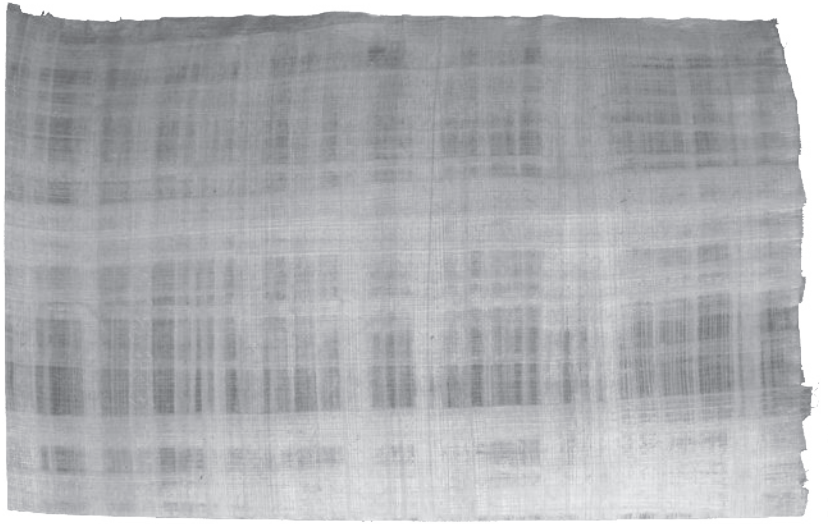
Parchment. For more permanent writing, two major materials were used: parchment and papyrus. Parchment sheets were leather from the hide of a sheep, goat, or calf. The inner side of the sheet, which was smoother and lighter in color, was preferred. This side has traditionally been termed the "recto" (Latin *rectus*), as the "proper" side of the sheet. The flipside of the sheet has appropriately been called the "verso" (Latin *versus*), although "hair side" and "flesh side" are becoming common terms. Sheets were sewn together with animal or vegetable fibers to make a longer strip that was rolled up to make a scroll. The seams of a scroll were strong but were not smooth. One could not write across them. Properly, one wrote only on the inside (recto) of a scroll, but many took the savings and wrote on the back as well, an opisthograph (cf. Rev. 5:1). Along with many other rolls that Pliny the Elder left to his nephew, he bequeathed 160 rolls that were written on both sides (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 3.5.17).

Papyrus. By the time of the NT, papyrus had been popular for millennia. The reed grew along the Nile and was considered unequaled for writing (Cassiodorus,

4. S. J. B. Barnish, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Cassiodorus [Variae epistolae]* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992).

28.2. Wax writing tablet.

Variae 11.38.3). Growing five to fifteen feet in height, the reeds were cut into lengths of about a man's forearm (twelve inches or so). The roughly triangular stalk was about as thick as a man's wrist. The inner pith was sliced into tape-like strips about two to three inches wide. These strips were placed side by side on a pattern board. A second layer was placed on top at a right angle. Pounding or pressing the layers squeezed out most of the juice. The remaining cellulose glued the strips together. (Pliny the Elder mistakenly claims the Nile water was the glue [*Nat. Hist.* 13.23; H. Rackham, LCL].) The dried sheet was trimmed and then polished smooth with pumice. The result was a surprisingly strong, flexible, smooth, white surface.

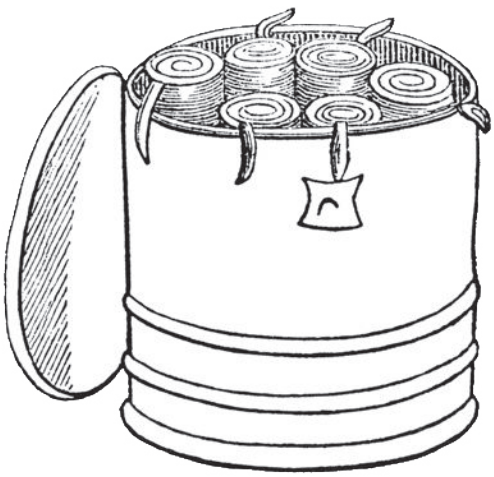


28.3. Modern reproduction of a papyrus sheet.

Pliny the Elder considered papyrus quite durable and (incorrectly) blamed an Alexandrian embargo of papyrus for forcing Pergamum to develop parchment (Turner, *Papyri*, 9). It remains debated why one was preferred over the other. It is commonly asserted that parchment was stronger and more durable than papyrus but that parchment was more expensive. Roger Bagnall has recently argued that (in Egypt, several centuries later) parchment was twice the price of papyrus (*Books*, 55). It does appear the NT world preferred papyrus, perhaps because parchment was more expensive in NT times.

Roll (Scroll). Rolls were typically made from either parchment (see above) or papyrus. With papyrus, the side with the horizontal fibers was considered the recto, for it was easier to write on. Sheets were then glued so that the right edge overlapped the left edge of the next sheet, allowing seams to be easily written across. According to Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist.* 13.23), papyrus manufacturers glued twenty sheets together to make a standard *volumen* ("book roll," from the Latin *volvere*, "to roll") of about fifteen feet. This standard roll, a *charta*, cost about four denarii (Millard, *Reading*, 165) and held fifteen hundred to two thousand lines. The roll, or scroll, was the standard book of antiquity. (Purists like to point out that the noun is "roll" and the verb is "to scroll"; thus, one would scroll a roll. The resulting roll, though, is commonly today called a "scroll.")

Although papyrus rolls were sold in a set length, sheets could be either cut off or pasted on to adjust the length. Galen (ca. AD 200) insists that his books are "well proportioned" and "useful" for the reader, although he concedes that some volumes are more than four thousand *stichoi* and may need to be divided in half (*On Consolation from Grief*, 28–29). This matches other comments of long scrolls reaching about thirty-five feet. This practical limit effectively established the length for a volume. Rolls were transported in a cylindrical container called a *capsa*. "Bring . . . the books" (2 Tim. 4:13) certainly refers to a collection of scrolls and likely in a *capsa* (see photo). Scrolls were read by unrolling with the right hand while gradually rerolling with the left hand so that only a column or two of text was exposed for reading.



28.4. Scrolls were transported in a cylindrical carrying case called a *capsa*. This sketch is from William Smith, *A School Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873), 65.

Codex (Book or Notebook). While the official form of an

ancient book was the roll, ancients did use also the codex format. (A codex is the format of modern books, where the pages are attached on one side.) Probably the origin of the term "codex" (meaning "a block of wood") came either from slicing a block into tablets or from the fact that a stack of tablets resembled a block of wood. Holes were bored in the wood, and tablets were tied together to make a tablet book (*codicilli*). Two leaves (a diptych) were most popular, but up to five are common. The well-known painting of the couple from Pompeii shows her holding a four-leaf tablet (see photo). No examples of tablets with more than ten leaves have been found.

Tablets were used for quick notes. Acidinus informs Servius Sulpicius by *codicilli* that Marcellus is dead (Cicero, *Fam*. 4.12.2; W. G. Williams, LCL). Cicero (*Fam*. 6.18.2) sent Balbus *codicilli* when he needed some quick information about a law or when Atticus wanted a swift reply (*Att*. 12.7). Such notes were easy and inexpensive, since tablets were reusable: one washed ink off the wood or smoothed out the wax. Tablets were also used "for first drafts" of writings (Turner, *Papyri*, 6). Thus tablets were viewed as informal or unofficial writing.

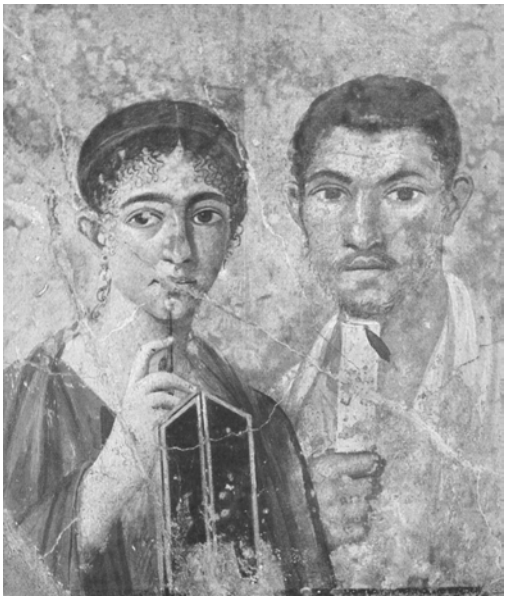
Having a Bible

Scriptures were not gathered into a single volume or discrete collection until after the NT period. A complete "Bible" would require seventy-eight papyrus rolls (Bagnall, *Books*, 55). Also, writings were very expensive. Most synagogues in Jesus' day could afford only a few scrolls. This may explain why Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms. Perhaps Nazareth could afford only one from each section of Scripture. Certainly a complete OT (an anachronistic term for several reasons) would have been found in few places, perhaps only in the Judean temple. Likely there were entire books of the Jewish Scriptures that Peter or John had never even heard. Having a complete set of Scripture is a modern experience.

By the time of the NT, parchment notebooks (similar to our modern books) were becoming popular. Sheets were stacked, sewn down the middle, and folded over. The sheet was called a *quaternion* (Latin) or *tetradia* (Greek) because, once folded, it made four pages. Unlike papyrus, which did not tolerate water well, parchment, when prepared appropriately, was easily washed off and reused. These parchment notebooks (*membranae*) were used for the same purposes as the tablets (Roberts and Skeat, *Codex*, 15–23) but were lighter and more durable. Yet such notebooks still carried the stigma of not being official books (Roberts and Skeat, *Codex*, 29). Thus, Paul requests both his books (rolls) *and* his notebooks (*membranae*) that were left in Troas (2 Tim. 4:13).

The Making of Manuscripts and the Study of the New Testament

Christians appear to be the first widespread adopters of the new codex book form. In Egypt the "codex scarcely counted" among documentary remains (Roberts and Skeat, *Codex*, 37); yet, all surviving copies of Christian Scriptures were in the



28.5. A wall fresco found at Pompeii. In this portrait of a Roman couple, the woman is holding a writing tablet and stylus, and the man is holding a scroll.

codex form (except those copied on the back on a used roll; Bagnall, *Books*, 58–59). This wholesale switch from roll to codex cannot be explained merely by preference. The three common explanations all argue that something *Christian* precipitated adopting the codex. C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat suggest the publication of the four Gospels as one book. Gamble suggests the publication of a collection of Paul's letters as a single book. I have argued that Paul retained copies of his letters and kept them in *membranae* (Richards, *Letter Writing*, 210–15). This was a common practice. I then suggest that the original set fell into the hands of disciples after his death. Copies were made keeping (somewhat arbitrarily) the original format. No matter the theory, we can say that Christians were avid users of the codex.

The Author in the New Testament World

When you imagine Luke penning his Gospel, you might superimpose a picture of how we used to write college papers before computers. I slipped into a quiet room and sat at a desk with pen and paper. After some thought, I composed as I wrote. If I had sources, I was careful not to plagiarize. When I finished, I turned it in. Ancient writing differed in just about every way.

Sources and Preformed Material

Pliny the Elder had a slave to write down excerpts from books he was reading (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 3.5). Ancients commonly pulled material from other

writings, sometimes indicating the source and sometimes not. Usually the writer was expecting the hearers to recognize the material and therefore did not call attention to it. Ancients did not use quotation marks. Modern readers sometimes struggle to recognize a piece of quoted material, as in 1 Cor. 6:12. New Testament writers often quoted hymnic fragments, standardized arguments (*topoi*), and early kerygma, often without identifying it. When we modern readers have the source, such as the OT, then we recognize it as quoted.

Collaborative Ancient Authorship

We should not superimpose modern values on the dyadic culture of the NT. They valued teamwork. Paul included others in the letter opening of at least six of his letters. There is no evidence that this was merely a sign of courtesy or humility. The role of Paul's cosenders (coauthors?) is still disputed (so Adams in Porter and Adams, *Ancient Letter Form*, 40–44). The community of a Gospel writer likely heard the material many times (John 21:24). Likewise, team members probably made comments during the editing process as they heard the draft read. Westerners value individualism, but Paul asserted that the hand could not devalue the foot (1 Cor. 12:15).

Authors and the Study of the New Testament

No matter the original source of some material (e.g., the use of a tradition from the *Testament of Moses* in Jude 9) or the contributions of colleagues, the author assumed complete responsibility for the content (see Richards, *Letter Writing*, 109–21, for a fuller discussion).

Secretaries and the Art of Composition

If a friend could write, why hire a secretary? Actually, a friend was likely sufficient for quick notes, receipts, and short letters. Asclepiades wrote to Portis about receiving a shipment of fruit. The letter ends: "Written for him hath Eumelus the son of Herma . . . , being desired to do so for that he writeth somewhat slowly" (Deissmann, *Light*, 166–67, notes this is probably a euphemism for illiteracy). From other ancient letters where we recovered the original, we can clearly see a change in handwriting at the end of the letter, where (likely) the sender wrote—commonly a summary of sorts and a greeting or well-wish—in his or her own hand. In P.Mich. 8.496, the subscription in the sender's (?) original hand is as long as the main letter.[5]

Secretarial Skills

There were other reasons a secretary was a better choice than a friend: if the project was longer or needed to impress, or if the writer was away from home.

5. Youtie and Winter, *Papyri from Karanis*, 109.

In fact, we should assume that a secretary was used for a document unless the writer indicates otherwise. Secretaries had the writing materials and the rolls of *charta*. They knew how to cut off the needed length, prick and score the lines on the sheets, and mix the ink. Since the papyrus probably cost at least twice as much as the secretary's labor, why pay so much for the materials and risk an ineffective or embarrassing document?

Table 1. Common Letter Formulas

	Format	Papyri	Paul
Disclosure Formula	"I want you to know that . . .	P.Oxy. 1155, 1481, 1493, 1670	Gal. 1:11
Thanksgiving Formula	"I give thanks to [usually a god or goddess] for [usually good news] . . ."	P.Oxy. 1299, 1070, 1481	Eph. 1:15–16; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:3; Philem. 4
Astonishment Formula	"I am amazed that [usually a failure to write] . . ."	P.Mich. 8.479	Gal. 1:6
Petition Formula	A verb of request [usually *parakaleō*], vocative, and the request	P.Oxy. 292, 1480, 1666	Rom. 12:1; 15:30; 16:17; 1 Cor. 1:10; 16:15; 2 Cor. 2:8; 10:1

Letters used certain conventions, in which secretaries were well versed. For example, letters had stereotyped phrases (see table 1). Then as now, messing up a set phrase (like an idiom) implies a certain ignorance or incompetence in the language. Officials had titles. There were polite ways to ask something or to inform someone. Secretaries protected a writer from social as well as linguistic blunders.

More important, a secretary knew the appropriate style for the letter or document, including the proper rhetoric. In which type of letter does one appeal to *exempli*? Ancient documents had a very set method of presentation (rhetoric). An argument was to be arranged in a certain order (*dispositio*). How embarrassing (and ineffective) it would be to fail to appeal to *ethos* in one's *exordium*! The average person (then and now) was not trained in this; secretaries were. Even a very highly skilled orator like Cicero noted (privately) that his secretary Tiro provided "assistance" (Cicero, *Fam.* 16.4.3, 11.1).

Secretarial Roles

The role a secretary played in the writing of a particular document depended on the wishes of the author and the skills of the secretary. A secretary could transcribe

dictation. Usually this meant syllable by syllable (*syllabatim*). Seneca (*Epist. mor.* 40.10) ridicules someone who stammered badly by saying he spoke as if he were dictating. Cicero mentions fretting over the wording of a document and dictating it *syllabatim* (*Att.* 13.25). In the case of standardized receipts, appeals, and official letters, a secretary could be given the general guidelines, being expected to choose the appropriate format and diction—that is what the secretary was paid for!

These two examples, though, are the extremes. Probably the most common method was for the secretary to take detailed notes on tablets as the author spoke slowly. Later, the secretary would return with a draft, almost certainly on a notebook (wooden or parchment). This process of hearing the draft read, editing, and expanding, was done not in a private room—only a sleeping room (*cubiculum*) was really private—but likely in one of the common rooms, such as the open-air colonnaded garden (*peristylium*), where we have pictures of philosophers gathering, or in the dining area (*triclinium*), perhaps as part of a meal. Depending on its importance, a document might go through many drafts over a period of weeks or months.

Arguments that note the influence of a secretary are sometimes critiqued, as Bart Ehrman does for 1 Peter, by suggesting that this makes the secretary the "real author."[6] This argument, however, suggests there were only two options: the author either dictated the material or capitulated and allowed a secretary free rein. Actually, neither was the common method. Moreover, ancients were not confused as to who was in charge. The author assumed full responsibility for everything in the document. For this reason, authors carefully checked the final draft (see Richards, *Letter Writing*, 81–84).

Secretaries and the Study of the New Testament

We should assume that all the NT epistles were written with the assistance of a secretary. Paul specifically notes it five times (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19). Also, long subscriptions were not unknown. If 2 Cor. 10–13 is a subscription in Paul's own hand, it is just another way Paul deviated from pattern. He had long paraenetic (moral exhortation) sections. Paul also wrote more (and longer) thanksgivings than any known writer in antiquity.

The author's unique writing style was often muddied since so many others provided input during the composing and editing and because of the influence of a secretary. Robert Tyrrell and Louis Purser, the undisputed authorities on Cicero's letters, note that the writing style of some of Cicero's letters was so influenced by the secretary that Cicero's unique writing style was lost (*Cicero*, 2:lxix–lxx). Likewise, Trajan's letters display similar variation in style (Sherwin-White, *Letters of Pliny*, 541). Josephus mentions having "assistants" (*Ag. Ap.* 1.50). Henry Thackeray, a leading scholar on Josephus, notes that the "immense debt" Josephus

6. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 139.

owes them "is apparent on almost every page of the work" (*Life*, 1:xv). For this reason, stylistic analyses of ancient letters are rarely helpful for ascertaining authenticity (see Kenny, *Stylometric*, esp. 99–100).

Dispatching/Publishing

When the author was satisfied with the draft, the secretary prepared a nice copy on good papyrus for distribution (or dispatch if a letter). Appearances (Cicero, *Q. Fr.* 1.15b.1) as well as word choice (Cicero, *Att.* 7.3) mattered. In modern editions of ancient papyri, editors often note that a papyrus was written in a neat and careful script. For example, the secretary's handwriting for P.Mich. 8.496 was "large and elegant," and the hand of letter 468 "creates an impression of skill and long practice."[7] Of course, skill levels varied. A copy was retained by the author, probably in a notebook. If multiple copies were needed, the secretary was tasked with the job.

The Cost of Writing

A soldier from Egypt wrote home to his mother that he had reached his assignment safely (P.Mich. 8.490). After the secretary prepared the final copy for dispatch, someone else (probably the soldier) added, "Know that I have been assigned to Misenum, for I learned it later." This letter likely cost about a half denarius for the materials and a secretary. Since the typical papyrus letter, like this one, was brief, all but the poorest could afford to send a letter when needed. We must caution, however, that NT documents were not typical. What we consider brief, 3 John, was a typical letter of that time. Paul's Letters were long by comparison (see table 2). Paul's opponents ridiculed his letters with a pun that worked in Greek as well as English: his letters were "weighty" (2 Cor. 10:10). The biggest surprise to the Roman church was likely the size of Paul's letter. Although letter writing was "affordable" to most, NT documents were more expensive just because of their length.

Table 2. Length of Paul's Letters Compared

Length by Number of Words	Paul	Seneca	Cicero	All Extant Papyrus Letters (~14,000)
Shortest	335	149	22	18
Longest	7,114	4,134	2,530	209
Average	2,495	995	295	87

Note: The estimates are derived from Alfred Wikenhauser and Josef Schmid, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), 245. The numbers for Paul have been adjusted to reflect NA[27].

7. Youtie and Winter, *Papyri from Karanis*, 16, 24.

Also, it is difficult to convert ancient expenses into today's equivalent. Technically, a denarius had a set amount of silver (1/10 of a troy ounce); yet the cost of silver today is a fraction of the Roman price. If we use silver as a measure, a denarius is worth a few dollars. Historians will commonly use the price of wheat to determine the value of a denarius (see Bagnall, *Books*, 52); yet Americans pay far less for food than did ancients. If we use bread as a measure, a denarius is worth twenty to thirty US dollars. It is commonly stated that a denarius equaled a day's wage. The evidence for such an assertion is usually Jesus' parable of the generous employer (Matt. 20:1–15). Millard (*Reading*, 165) and I (Richards, *Letter Writing*, 168) agree that an unskilled worker probably earned closer to half a denarius per day. This would set a denarius at roughly 110 US dollars. Papyrus cost four denarii per roll. Scribes charged twenty-five denarii per ten thousand lines (P.Lond. Inv. 2110), probably writing about four hundred *stichoi* (lines) per day, earning roughly a denarius a day as a skilled laborer.

Table 3. Approximate Cost of Writing New Testament Letters

	Number of Lines	Percentage of a Standard *Charta*	Cost in Denarii for Materials and Labor	Estimated Equivalent in Today's US Dollars
Romans	979	136%	20.68	$2,275
1 Corinthians	908	126%	19.16	$2,108
2 Corinthians	607	84%	12.80	$1,408
Galatians	311	43%	6.56	$722
Philippians	221	31%	4.68	$515
2 Thessalonians	111	15%	2.32	$255
Philemon	44	6%	0.92	$101

Taking these numbers into consideration, table 3 shows the estimated cost involved in the composition of various NT letters.[8] With regard to a copy of Isaiah, Millard concludes it would cost six to ten denarii to reproduce, and he notes, "While that is not cheap, it would not put books out of the reach of the reasonably well-to-do" (Millard, *Reading*, 165). Although we may quibble over exchange rates, the main point remains: the length of most NT documents made them quite expensive.

8. For a fuller explanation, see Richards, *Letter Writing*, 165–69. These estimates consider the cost of preparing one dispatched copy and one retained copy. I used the lower rate of twenty-five denarii per ten thousand lines, but P.Mich. 8.855 suggests a higher rate. Bagnall (*Books*, 52–57) notes also the challenges of using the Edict of Diocletian (AD 301) to calculate the cost. Even if quite a bit inaccurate, these estimates (which were consistently rounded downward) still serve to show that preparing NT documents was no trivial expense.

The Challenges of "Original Autographs"

An autograph is literally a document in one's own handwriting. When referring to NT writings, however, scholars typically mean the original document. For Romans they mean the original letter that Paul sent to Rome. There are several challenges with this concept. First, no original of any NT document has been found. It is universally thought that all have perished. Second, to call a text an "autograph" is somewhat ill fitting. Paul's original Letter to the Romans was largely in the handwriting of Tertius, the secretary (Rom. 16:22). Last and most important, the term is a bit anachronistic. Collaborative aspects of authorship aside, which copy of Paul's Letter to the Romans was the original, the copy he dispatched or the copy he retained? This is not merely a Pauline problem. In a work for publication, sometimes the work needed redacting to fit onto a standard roll. Clearly, Luke-Acts was written to be a two-volume work (roll). The longer, so-called Western version of Acts is perhaps too long. Was it the rough or retained draft while a shorter, tighter version was sent to Theophilus, or was it just a later expansion, as is commonly suggested? To take an example from the OT: How do we discuss the original autograph of Jeremiah? Baruch wrote it down (Jer. 36:4), but the original was cut up and burned (36:23) and had to be rewritten (36:27–28, 32). At the time of the NT, was the shorter version of Jeremiah (represented by the LXX and two DSS fragments) the original, or was the longer version (represented by the MT and several DSS fragments) the original? While I personally hold a high view of Scripture, I must admit that there are challenges to the concept of original autographs.

Happenstance Letter Carriers

"From Cyrene, where I found a man who was journeying to you, I deemed it necessary to write to you about my welfare." (PMich. 8.490)

"As an opportunity was afforded me by someone going up to you I could not miss this chance of addressing you. I am amazed, my son, that to date I received from you no news of your welfare." (POxy. 123)

"I found the boat sailing down, and I thought that I ought to let you know about what I have said." (POxy. 1153)

Letter Carriers

The (highly efficient) Roman postal system was only for official business, and so individuals had to find other means to send letters. Typically, a letter was entrusted into the hands of someone already going that way, a happenstance carrier (see sidebar). Often the sender wrote not because of some pressing need but because someone happened to be going there. Otherwise, a private carrier, usually a slave, had to be sent. The aristocracy maintained private carriers: Cicero complained that Cassius's private carrier had rushed Cicero to finish the letter so that he could get on his way (Cicero, *Fam.* 15.17.1–2). We should not rule out private carriers for most NT letters (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Pet. 5:12).

Private Letter Carriers

A private letter carrier was someone, often a slave, who was sent to a specific place for the task of delivering a letter. If able, a private carrier might transport supplies as well. Often this was mentioned in the letter, perhaps to encourage the honesty of the carrier. For example, Apollinarius writes to his "father" Sabinus:

> A number of times I asked Longinus, who brings you the letter, to take something for you, and he refused, saying that he was unable; but I want you to know that Domitius the [. . . took along a basket in which] there was a [. . .] for you. . . . If then you love me, you will straightway take pains to write to me concerning your health and, if you are anxious about me, to send me linen garments through Sempronius, for merchants come to us from Pelusium every day. (P.Mich. 8.466)

Another letter reads:

> Having learned that you are in Bacchias, I salute you, brother, and urge you to write to us immediately concerning your health. For I have already used up a papyrus roll [*charta*] in writing to you, and I received barely one letter from you, in which you informed me that I should receive the cloaks and the pig. The pig I did not receive, but the cloaks I did get. Farewell. (P.Mich. 8.496)

Similarly, Paul assures the church that Epaphroditus has faithfully delivered their gift (Phil. 4:18).

A private carrier could assure the recipient that the letter was authentic, since forgeries occurred (2 Thess. 2:2). Brutus writes to Cicero: "Please write me a reply to this letter at once and send one of your own men with it, if there is anything somewhat confidential which you think it necessary for me to know" (Cicero, *Fam.* 11.20.4). Private carriers were commonly expected to elaborate. Often a letter would commend the carrier as "trustworthy" to validate any additional information (1 Pet. 5:12; Col. 4:7; Cicero, *Fam.* 11.20.4; 11.26.5). Paul states he has told Tychicus to inform them about his imprisonment (Eph. 6:20–22). Paul is not ashamed of his chains, and he does not want the Ephesians to think Tychicus is revealing secrets (as sometimes happened; 1 Cor. 1:11). Paul may initially have used happenstance carriers. Surely even a modestly informed carrier could have sorted out the confusion in the "previous letter" (1 Cor. 5:9–10).

Scriptoria

In a third-century AD copy of the *Iliad*, a scribe once noted in a colophon (a scribal comment) that writing was the result of the hand, pen, *and knee*.[9] This copy of the *Iliad* was prepared in a scriptorium (a book-copying workshop). Before the printing press, copies of books were made by hand and on demand. It has long

9. Theodore Cressy Skeat, "The Use of Dictation in Ancient Book-Production," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 42 (1956): 179–208, esp. 183.

been argued that books were made by one person reading from the original, while several or perhaps a room full of people wrote it down. Two reasons are usually given. First, it just seems a more practical way to make multiple copies. Recently, D. C. Parker has called this assumption into question (*Sinaiticus*, 54–55). The practice has no evidence, and it presumes booksellers stocked books rather than making individual copies to order. Also, Parker questions if it was more efficient. I would also add that ancients did not particularly prize efficiency. The cost was by the line, not the time involved. The second argument for copying by lector is that scholars have noted a common error (called an "itacism") in copies: two words that sound alike (e.g., homophones such as "their" and "there" in English) are confused with each other so that the wrong word is written. The usual explanation is that the reader said the correct word, and the hearer wrote the wrong one. Yet, even today, itacisms are common errors.

Dispatching/Publishing and the Study of the New Testament

We should not assume that NT documents were dashed off one evening amid a flurry of mission activities. They were not carelessly written—rhetorical criticism is showing us just how carefully composed they were. Paul's comment about baptizing the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16) is usually considered a spontaneous or parenthetical remark, but it may well be careful rhetoric to imply that the Corinthians were boasting about matters that were trivial and hard even to remember. Cicero writes what looks like a spontaneous correction: "Well, then, his arrival—I mean Caesar's—is being eagerly awaited"; but the editors caution us that "it is a serious error to ascribe carelessness" to Cicero (Tyrrell and Purser, *Cicero*, 1:76). Seneca calls his letters "carelessly written" (Seneca, *Epist. mor.* 75.1; R. M. Gummere, LCL), but Richard Gummere warns us that this remark should not be taken literally.[10]

We should not imagine that when Luke finished his Gospel, he sent it to a scriptorium that prepared a dozen copies to sell to various churches. Publishing a document was more than merely disseminating copies of an "original autograph." A community could fund the expense for the text's composition but could also validate the document's authenticity and even the reason(s) for its publication. John 21 perhaps should be read in this light. To produce the Gospel and Acts, Luke needed the equivalent in today's currency of perhaps as much as four thousand US dollars for each text. It is no surprise he needed a benefactor.

Earle Ellis has suggested that Christianity had four centers in the first century; each had an apostolic founder, a Gospel, and some letters (*Making*, 32–45). Certainly, we should not assume that most local churches had a copy of even one Gospel. Initially, because it was too expensive to have a copy of everything, churches tended to copy what was "useful."

10. Richard M. Gummere, ed. and trans., *Seneca: Epistles [Ad Lucilium epistulae morales]* (3 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917–25), 1:x.

See also "Education in the Greco-Roman World"; "Jewish Education"; "Pseudonymous Writings and the New Testament."

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