

David Trobisch and David Parker on the Origin of the New Testament, the Historical Jesus, and How Manuscripts Can Reveal What Texts Conceal

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I grew up with a picture of Paul traveling through Asia and Europe, founding congregations, counseling and teaching the men and women who had given their life to Jesus. If he could not visit them, he sent letters. When Paul died, his letters were kept as treasures. Each church that had received one of his letters saved it, had it read during worship services, and exchanged copies of the letter with other congregations close by. Later the congregations tried to complete their collection. But this view does not match the uniformity of manuscript evidence.

--David Trobisch¹

It is even more remarkable that attempts to reconstruct the supposed document 'Q' (the lost collection used by both Matthew and Luke postulated by those who argue that Matthew and Luke are independent) use text-critical terminology to describe their activities. However, since all they are doing is making selections from a twentieth-century printed text, which does not even presume to provide confidently the text of the four-Gospel collection, never mind that of the independent first-century texts, this use of language must be dismissed as illusory.

--David Parker²

Modern scholarship has produced detailed biographies of Paul, massive multi-volume inquiries into “the historical Jesus,” and mountains of exegetical literature that claims to extract the author’s meaning from each word of each New Testament book. Typically, this literature analyzes the scriptural texts with little reference to actual manuscripts. Exegetes and even historians typically allude to manuscripts only briefly when they encounter variant readings that they deem particularly significant, such as the longer endings of Mark, the story of the adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11, or the addition of the “without cause” to the condemnation of anger in Matthew 5:22. It is not often that one sees a sober assessment of the degree to which the text preserved by the manuscripts accurately represents what a book’s original author actually wrote.

In the recently published book *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, David Parker attempts to convince his readers that the manuscripts deserve more attention. The most effective illustration that Parker is correct, however, has already been available for years in the form of a pair of books by David Trobisch, English

¹ *Paul's Letter Collection* (Bolivar, MO: Quiet Waters Publications, 2001), 18.

² *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 314.

versions of which are titled *Paul's Letter Collection* and *The First Edition of the New Testament*.³

The sheer volume of new books in the field of New Testament studies that are produced every year and compete for scholars' attention means many of those who could benefit from Parker's book may have passed over it in favor of others more directly related to their area of interest. The same could be said of David Trobisch's books even though they have been available for many years. In this article I will review these books and argue that no one who wishes to understand the Bible or early Christianity can afford to be ignorant of their contents.

Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts

The ancient manuscripts that preserve the New Testament text disagree with each other in myriad ways as a result of repeated hand copying over the course of centuries. Textual criticism is commonly thought of as the process of examining these disagreements in order to determine in each case which manuscripts are most likely to have preserved the original text. For example, the earliest manuscripts do not include the story of Jesus rescuing the woman about to be stoned for adultery (John 7:53-8:11), so the textual critic determines that it is a later interpolation.

Parker's book is not about how to do textual criticism. It contains nothing about even such basic principles as *lectio difficilior* (the more difficult reading is preferred). Instead, the book's main purpose is to provide background information needed by anyone who wishes to undertake textual criticism of the New Testament. The book presents detailed information about the ancient manuscripts that have preserved the New Testament text, and it explains the history and use of modern critical editions of the text that has been preserved by those manuscripts. The book admirably accomplishes these two goals and is magnificently illustrated by a companion web site that shows sample pages from upwards of 50 manuscripts and printed books.⁴

Parker does discuss the goals of textual criticism at some length. He agrees with the common view that a primary goal is to identify earlier or later forms of a text, but he does not believe that a "correct" or "original" form is discoverable. He asserts that the goal cannot possibly be the recovery of the original version of any New Testament text as it emerged from the author's pen, and he laments that scholars typically ignore this fact:

³ Trobisch's English books were preceded by German versions. *Paul's Letter Collection* was preceded by *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung: Studien zu den Anfängen der christlichen Publizistik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1989). *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) was preceded by *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1996).

⁴ Available at <http://itsee.bham.ac.uk/parker/introduction>.

... exegetes often speak of the critical text as though it were an authorial text even if the editor has made no such claim for it. ... The normal approach is to discuss the different possibilities, to decide which was the 'best' or 'original' and by implication authorial and then to commentate upon it and to ignore the others.⁵

The normal approach as described here is lamentable in part because it assumes we can confidently recover the author's original text. Parker asserts that to the contrary, the best we can do with any New Testament text is establish the form in which it existed in the late second century, roughly a hundred years after the text was written. We have no manuscripts of significant size from earlier than about 200 AD, we see abundant evidence that variations had arisen already at that time, and we have no way of knowing what changes copyists and editors may have introduced in the century between when a text was written and our earliest copy of it. We do not even know if the author himself or herself created multiple versions of a text for different purposes.

Parker himself does not pursue this principle to its logical conclusions beyond the occasional complaint about how often scholars ignore it. One such comment is the remark about Q reproduced at the head of this article, and that comment is worth a second look.

Consider the oceans of ink that have been spilled in the search for "the historical Jesus." Much of this work revolves around attempts to identify earlier layers of tradition within the canonical gospels. The working consensus in New Testament scholarship is that one way to do this is to identify in Matthew and Luke the remnants of an early written gospel that was lost. This line of thinking assumes that Matthew and Luke both used Mark's gospel as a source, but Matthew did not know Luke and Luke did not know Matthew. Therefore, the many cases of identical wording in Matthew and Luke, in passages that do not appear in Mark, must have been copied from some written source other than Mark. Scholars have named this postulated source Q, reconstructed its text, and found that it consisted mainly of sayings of Jesus. Some of them have gone so far as to publish "editions" of Q, and some have even reconstructed the "redaction history" of this hypothetical document. Many scholars claim that Q gives us a more reliable picture of the historical Jesus than we can get from the gospels without it.

For Parker, these attempts to reconstruct Q represent one of the most egregious examples of losing sight of the simple facts that he so assiduously demonstrates. The whole Q reconstruction project depends on the assumption that the synoptic gospels as we have them in today's critical editions are just as they were when they emerged from the pens of

⁵ *New Testament Manuscripts*, 184.

their authors. It depends on the assumption that Matthew and Luke were each working with one and the same copy of Mark, which is also one and the same as what we have in a modern critical text. It depends on the assumption that Matthew and Luke were each working with one and the same copy of Q. It depends on the assumption that the modern creators of critical texts are able to accurately identify instances where parts of Matthew were integrated into Luke, or vice versa, as part of the process of textual transmission. All of these are deeply flawed and highly questionable assumptions. Parker conservatively restricts his overt criticism of Q to a claim that textual criticism terminology as applied to the work being done on Q is “illusory.” But it is clear that he might as well have taken the entire project to task, and with it much of the work that has been done on discovering a more accurate historical view of Jesus in recent years.

Parker advocates the abandonment of any idea of recovering a single “authoritative” version of a text at all. He sees the entire history of variant readings as a story of changing interpretations over time, with each interpretation having its own validity and historical interest.⁶

The story of Jesus and the adulterous woman (John 7:53-8:11) is an example of how this principle works. It is clear from the manuscript history that the story is a later interpolation since it is absent from our earliest manuscripts of John. However, the story has played such an important role in the Gospel of John and in Christian history for so many centuries that it hardly makes sense to dismiss and ignore it. The fact that the story was eventually propagated to almost all later manuscripts is itself a commentary on how the book of John was understood. Obviously, in this case one cannot simply choose the “best reading” and dismiss the others as irrelevant, and Parker argues that the same principle applies in varying degrees to all of the variant readings.

A related issue of crucial importance to Parker is the principle that textual criticism cannot function as a “foundational discipline.” In other words, it is fundamentally unsound to assume that one set of scholars (the textual criticism discipline) can examine the manuscripts and determine the likelihood that any given reading is the original form of a text, after which others (the exegetical discipline, the historical discipline, the patristic discipline, etc.) work with that assessment as their starting point. In reality, all of the disciplines involved in understanding the New Testament are interrelated. In principle few people would dispute this, but in practice New Testament exegetes tend to overlook it. The consequences of doing exegesis or history while leaving manuscript knowledge to others, or rather the opportunities for new historical understandings opened up by taking this principle seriously, are best illustrated by the Trobisch theory.

⁶ This principle is expounded more fully in his book *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

Although the title of Parker's book identifies it as an "introduction" and includes basic topics, such as how to interpret a critical edition's apparatus, it is difficult to imagine any New Testament scholar aside from specialists in this subject matter who would not benefit greatly from reading it. Individuals who are not academics fluent in Greek, but are ambitious enough to try it, will find it enlightening but frustrating at times. The book makes no attempt to be accessible for the general reader: it presumes a knowledge of Greek, German, and Latin, and it delves into a level of detail that would be painful for anyone but a specialist or aspiring specialist in the field.

The Formation of New Testament Canon

Trobisch's interest in manuscript knowledge is similar to Parker's, but he finds a practical application for that knowledge in a theory about how the New Testament came into being. The reigning consensus among contemporary scholars on this subject is that the New Testament was produced through a largely spontaneous and disorganized process that lasted until sometime in the fifth century. During the first century or so after people first began to write about Jesus, various more or less independent groups produced literary works intended to function as authoritative for their communities.

During that period and for several additional centuries, Christian communities everywhere were independently judging the merits of each of these works and were gathering them into collections. There was much disagreement about which books should be included in these collections and which ones should be excluded. Over time more and more of the disagreements were resolved, until at last everyone in Christendom agreed on what should be included in a single collection of authoritative books. The title "New Testament" ascribed to this collection also appeared spontaneously and gradually gained wide acceptance in a similar manner.

A key assumption that lies at the heart of the consensus view of how the canon was formed is that early Christian communities always saw the New Testament as a collection of separate books that each community could add to or subtract from. Bruce Metzger represents the best of mainstream scholarship, and his book *The Canon of the New Testament*,⁷ illustrates well the existence and the consequences of this assumption. In this book, Metzger discusses at length a question that he considers crucial to understanding the New Testament: should we consider it to be "a collection of authoritative books" or "an authoritative collection of books"? The first phrase presumes that each individual book is intrinsically "authoritative," and a status that was inherent simply came to be recognized over time. This view would naturally be popular with many Protestant scholars. Metzger's phrase "authoritative collection" presumes that

⁷ New York: Clarendon, 1997.

authority resides in the church, and the church delegates its authority to the books by including them in the collection. This view would naturally be popular with many Catholic and Orthodox scholars. Metzger is a Protestant scholar and opts for the Protestant view while insisting that his point of view is actually a matter of objective fact rather than theological preference:

From this point of view, the Church did not create the canon, but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church. If this fact is obscured, one comes into serious conflict not with dogma but with history.⁸

This entire discussion, and indeed the entire book, is woven around the foundational assumption that the New Testament is essentially a collection of individual documents. The process of collecting the documents was just that, a process of collecting them, and the collectors did not modify the texts they found. In other words, each book was produced by an author and possibly modified by editors, but the task of gathering multiple books together was done by people who were very careful to preserve the text as they found it—people who would not have substantially modified the texts for their own purposes.

The evidence that scholars such as Metzger have used to create this historical reconstruction comes almost exclusively from external sources: from what church fathers, church councils, and other ancient writers say about the New Testament texts. It is certainly true that much debate and disagreement can be found throughout these sources. Actually, long past the fifth century and up until the present there have been and still are Christians who would like to add to or subtract from the 27 books commonly acknowledged as making up the New Testament.

David Trobisch departs from the crowd by focusing on internal evidence. From a careful examination of the manuscripts he concludes that a spontaneous and haphazard process could not have resulted in the uniformity of certain characteristics that we find in them. This leads to the conclusion that the manuscripts derive from a single archetype, which in turn suggests that a single editor or publisher deliberately created the entire package at some very early date.⁹ An examination of features added by the editors (such as book titles) then provides clues to what the original editor or publisher was trying to accomplish.

⁸ *Canon*, 287.

⁹ For a project of this scale multiple editors and copyists would most likely be involved, but I am using the words “editor” and “publisher” in the singular to reflect the idea that the project was led by one person or undertaken by a single team with a clearly-defined set of goals.

The centuries of disputes among church people create no difficulty for Trobisch's reconstruction. He interprets these disagreements over what was "in" or "out" to reflect attempts to add to or subtract from this original package – just as some people continue to try to do today -- not attempts to create a new canon where there was none before.

Paul's Letter Collection

The first in the series of works by David Trobisch that challenge the received viewpoint is *Paul's Letter Collection*. The thesis of this book is that Paul himself initiated the first collection of his epistles by creating a literary unit consisting of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians, with Romans chapter 16 as its "cover note." The text as we know it is not the way the letters were originally sent but reflects their state after Paul edited them for publication. Paul created the original package of four books primarily as his testament to argue his case in a dispute with the Jewish Christian leaders based in Jerusalem. After Paul's death, his disciples expanded the collection by adding nine more epistles, and at a later time they added Hebrews as the 14th epistle.

The historical background is the strife between Paul and the Jerusalem Christian leadership. Paul's opponents argued that Jewish Law observance including circumcision was necessary for Gentile Christians, and they questioned his authoritative status as an apostle. An agreement was forged between the two sides in Jerusalem, and it was sealed by Paul's agreement to take up a money collection for "the poor" of Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-10). The Jerusalem leaders, including James and Peter, either did not understand the agreement the way Paul did or found it expedient to reinstate demands for Jewish Law observance anyway (Gal 2:11-14). The dispute between Paul and his "Judaizing" opponents is a recurring theme through many of Paul's epistles.

Paul's efforts to take up the promised collection is a common theme through the four epistles of his testament, and the final version of the testament as a whole reflects Paul's fear that the Jerusalem leaders would reject his offering. Such a rejection would constitute a symbolic rejection of Paul's apostolic authority and his freedom-from-Law-observance message. Thus, he wanted to leave a literary testament that would demonstrate the scriptural support for his views and his own diligence in living up to the terms of the Jerusalem agreement. Rejection of Paul's offering by the Jerusalem apostles would constitute yet another attempt to discredit him and a repudiation of the agreement forged earlier.

Trobisch reaches his conclusions about Paul's letter collection by comparing the manuscripts that preserve Paul's letters to what is known of other ancient letter collections. He explains and defends his methodology in a passage that exemplifies the clearly written narrative style of a book that is intended to be accessible to the general reader:

... the question has to be asked whether the letters of Paul, although they are now part of the Bible, were produced and reproduced very much the same way as most of the other letter collections of that time (especially in view of the fact that Paul is not a pagan writer but one of the authors of the New Testament)? Could it not be that the letters of Paul originated in a unique and unparalleled way for which there are no analogies?

It is possible. If you hold that point of view anything I will say from now on is worthless to you. This is the risk of any historical research, however, not only of Biblical Studies. All we have to argue with are analogies. All we can do is to describe what is most likely to have happened. Historical judgment is based on an evaluation of probability. And if we have to do with unique events, most methods of historical criticism fail.

I do not think that the letters of Paul originated in a very spectacular way. The evidence fits the picture of other letter collections too well.¹⁰

Ancient letter collections typically went through three stages. In the initial stage, the author selects the letters he wants to be published and edits them for publication. He has some purpose in mind that guides his choice of letters and the order in which he places them. He removes personal names or passages that would only have been of interest to the original addressees and makes other changes appropriate to a public edition. Trobisch calls these initial editions created by the author himself “authorized recensions.”

After the author dies, his disciples collect more letters and create “expanded editions.” Because of the difficulties inherent in rearranging the order of letters in hand-copied manuscripts, the expanded editions maintain the original author’s letter order and add the new letters after them rather than integrating them into the original ordering scheme. For example, if the author had gathered letters written on January 1, 15, and 25 and chose to arrange them in chronological order, and if his disciples found new ones from January 10, 20, and 30, the expanded edition would be in the order 1, 15, 25, 10, 20, 30 rather than 1, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30. The original collection would remain in chronological order and the additions would be in chronological order, but the transition between original and additions would be out of order.

In the third and final stage, the author’s disciples attempt to create “comprehensive editions” that include every known letter produced by the author.

Traces of a similar three-stage pattern can be seen in the collection of 14 epistles attributed to Paul in the New Testament. If one excludes the special case of Hebrews, manuscripts that preserve Paul’s epistles consistently have the same 13 epistles in the same order. They were arranged in two groups: letters to congregations and letters to individuals. Within each group the letters are ordered by size, from largest to smallest, except that multiple letters to the same addressee are kept together. The principle of decreasing size within a group holds true from Romans through Galatians (the first four epistles), from Ephesians to 2 Thessalonians (the next four epistles to congregations) and

¹⁰ *Paul’s Letter Collection*, 51-52.

from 1 Timothy to Philemon (the epistles to individuals). The eight epistles to congregations are out of order at one point: Ephesians is larger than Galatians, so it should have preceded rather than followed Galatians. This leads to the conclusion that Romans through Galatians was an initial collection to which the other nine books were added later. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians would then be the “authorized recension” created by the author, and the package of 13 would constitute an “expanded edition.” Hebrews was added later, and so the complete package of 14 epistles is the “comprehensive edition.”

If Romans through Galatians was the initial edition created by the author himself, what was he trying to accomplish by publishing it? For an answer to this question, Trobisch again starts by asking what people in Paul's day would typically do when they wanted to publish an edition of their letters. They would begin by selecting the examples of their work that best suit their purposes and put them into a logical order. The initial “authorized recension” would not contain all of the author's works, so there would be some thought and purpose behind the selection of which ones to include.

The author would also review the content of the letters to be published and make changes where needed. He would improve the cases of bad writing that may have resulted from writing a letter in a hurry to fulfill an immediate need. “Improvements” could include inserting whole blocks of text that were not in the original letters. The author would also remove references to individuals or matters that were of interest only at the time the letter was originally written or only to its original addressee. And he would change things to reflect changing relationships with people: for example, if a letter praises someone who was a friend when the letter was written, but the person later became an enemy, he might remove that person's name from the letter.

There are features of Paul's letters to the Galatians, Corinthians, and Galatians that can be interpreted as evidence of each of these kinds of editorial activity. Within these four books, references to personal names or private matters of interest only to the original addressees are generally absent. There are even instances where it seems that a name was deleted (2 Cor 8:18, 22; 13:18). The exception to the rule is Romans chapter 16, which contains an abundance of names that play no role in the literary purpose of the epistle. Therefore Trobisch proposes that Romans 16 was added as a “cover letter” for the entire authorized recension.

For Trobisch, Paul's reworking of his own epistles also explains some perplexing cases in 2 Corinthians where the author's attitude seems to change too suddenly and unaccountably. These have led many scholars to propose that 2 Corinthians was cobbled together from a series of smaller epistles. Trobisch goes a step further and proposes that

1 Corinthians is an amalgam of three and 2 Corinthians is an amalgam of four. First Corinthians would be composed of the letters Paul sent to Corinth during his stay in Ephesus, and 2 Corinthians would represent the letters he sent after leaving. Trobisch suggests that this also explains what some scholars have interpreted as references to “lost letters” (e.g., 2 Cor 7:8-12). There is no need to postulate lost letters, since a reference to a previous letter late in 2 Corinthians could easily be a reference to an earlier part of 2 Corinthians that was originally a separate letter.

In order to determine why Paul created the authorized recension, Trobisch tries to understand why he chose those four epistles for it. To do that, he looks for themes common to all of them. He observes that one common theme is the collection for the poor Christians of Jerusalem. He also looks for clues in the cover letter (Romans 16) and finds there a warning to beware of false brethren. The next most likely place to find what was foremost on Paul’s mind is the most recently written text, which after the cover letter would be the end of Romans proper (chapter 15). Here we find a reference to Paul’s desire to escape from “disobedient people in Judea” (15:32). Finally, the key to everything else is found in Galatians, which has the most carefully structured text of all. Galatians identifies the issues at stake: circumcision, Christian identity as tied to or independent from Jewish identity, money, and Paul’s apostleship. Galatians also names the people whom Paul was fighting against: the Jerusalem “pillars,” James and Peter and John.

Once the entire authorized recension is seen as being primarily motivated by Paul’s desire to create a literary testament that would argue his side in his dispute with the Jerusalem “pillars,” many aspects of the text can be seen in a new light. As Trobisch puts it, “The whole story takes on a macabre tone. Suddenly it sounds more like a story of money and crime than a passage from the New Testament.”¹¹ For example, the phrase “disobedient people in Judea” in Romans 15:32 can be recognized as an allusion to the “pillars.” And the warning against divisive people in Romans 16:17-19 is now to be read as a directed against James and Peter and their ilk, a warning addressed not to Rome but to Paul’s home base in Ephesus:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

Another interesting example is in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 7 Paul praises his own ability to remain unmarried while allowing that marriage is acceptable for people who are

¹¹ *Paul’s Letter Collection*, 89.

“unable to control themselves” (7:8-9). When two chapters later he alludes to the married status of “the brothers of the Lord [James] and Cephas [Peter]” (9:3-6), he is deliberately portraying them in a negative light.

At the end of this book, Trobisch looks forward to the subject matter of the next book in his suggestion that the New Testament as a whole addresses this same conflict: “The picture conveyed by the writings of the New Testament to their readers is one of unity. The conflict between Paul and Jerusalem was resolved.”¹² The reader is left to speculate as to whether that picture of unity was a contrary-to-fact literary fiction or if by some miracle Paul’s bitterest enemies came around to see things his way in the end.

Overall, Trobisch’s reconstruction is well-done and convincing, if not conclusive. There are a few book-order exceptions in the manuscript record that are not easily explained, and one of them is in the earliest manuscript of Paul’s letters, papyrus 46, which dates to ca. 200 AD.¹³ Also, one may well wonder why a cover letter for a package of four epistles would have been buried at the end of the first book in the series (Rom 16) instead of given a prominent place at the beginning or end of the whole literary unit. That said, the evidence that the whole collection goes back to a 13-epistle archetype, with Hebrews added later is very strong. Therefore, Trobisch’s book effectively undermines the view that the collection of Pauline epistles as we know it in the New Testament was created by different groups independently collecting epistles and adding to or subtracting from them based on judgments of the canonical quality of individual epistles.

The weight of the evidence also firmly supports the proposition that the epistles were edited for publication. If they were, this means that we are farther away from a reliable picture of what one might call “the historical Paul” than is commonly imagined, because the only epistles we have that he wrote have been carefully edited to present a particular image of him and his activities. To illustrate the impact editing can have on the image a text presents of its author, Trobisch cites the case of Cicero, for whom both edited letters and unedited ones have survived:

Shortly after the publication of this letter collection [which Cicero himself had collected and edited for publication] Cicero was assassinated. After Cicero's death his slave and secretary Tiro proceeded to publish additional letters. This creates an interesting situation.

¹² *Paul’s Letter Collection*, 98.

¹³ Papyrus 46 has the order Romans, Hebrews, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians. Trobisch suggests the copyist broke with tradition so that he could order the books strictly by size, but 1 Corinthians is larger than Hebrews. He explains that anomaly by proposing that the two Corinthian epistles could not be split up, but then it is not immediately apparent why those two rather than Hebrews should not have followed Romans. He argues that this unique order appears nowhere else in the Greek manuscripts and so it is reasonable to treat it as an isolated exception. However, as Parker points out, one fifth century manuscript of the Coptic version of Paul’s letters has a similar order (*New Testament Manuscripts*, 267).

We have letters edited by Cicero and letters not edited by him. A comparison of both allows us to get an idea of the amount and character of editorial work Cicero put into his letters before he allowed them to be published. The difference is striking. In 1345 the Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarch was the first to rediscover the letters of Cicero in an old manuscript after they had been unknown for centuries. When he read them, he was shocked and disappointed -- shocked because of the colloquial language and bad style of the letters and disappointed because the letters revealed a politician full of intrigue, whose poor character surpassed by far his bad grammar.

It cannot be proven, of course, that Paul himself edited the “authorized recension,” but the thesis is plausible.

The most important aspect of the Trobisch scenario – that the collection was deliberately created rather than coming into being spontaneously -- does not depend on Paul having done everything personally, though it would certainly have required a more skillful disciple to undertake this task than Cicero had in Tiro. Regardless of who did the editing, that process may have transformed our image of Paul as much as Cicero’s image was transformed by the editing of his letters.

Trobisch does not assert that all letters in the collection are genuine, and he does not assert that Paul was personally involved in the second two stages of collecting the letters. Indeed, he points out interpolations that appear to be uncharacteristic of Paul (such as 1 Cor 13 and 2 Cor 13:34-35) and may have been added to one of the editions by someone else.

The First Edition of the New Testament

Trobisch’s next book expands the approach taken in the earlier one to encompass the entire New Testament. The thesis of this book is that the entire package of 27 books that we now know as the New Testament was assembled by a single editor or editorial group as a complete and cohesive unit deliberately called “the New Testament.” This was the “first edition” of the Bible, and it was created in the late second century AD. This Canonical Edition consisted of two parts just as modern bibles do—Old Testament as well as New Testament.

As was true of *Paul’s Letter Collection*, the evidence is drawn primarily from the manuscript tradition. Trobisch finds commonalities among all four “collection units” (Paul’s epistles, the Four-Gospel book, Acts with the general epistles, and Revelation) that are strong enough to suggest that all known copies of the New Testament can be traced to a single archetype.

In the four oldest complete manuscripts of the New Testament, the same books are always presented in the same order within each of the four collection units. The Praxapostolos (Acts with the general epistles) might be placed before or after Paul’s

epistles, but it always appears as a unit and always contains the same books. The gospels are always the same four presented in the same order. And aside from some variation in the placement of Hebrews, Paul's epistles are always the same 14 in the same order. With few exceptions, the fragmentary manuscripts do not contradict this picture.

Trobisch emphasizes that this consistency should not be taken for granted, as we have examples of other collections that did arise spontaneously, and those show substantial variations in the order of books. One comparable example would be collections of the apostolic fathers, and that manuscript tradition demonstrates a wide variety in the writings selected and in the order in which they are presented.

The manuscripts are also uniform in that each book always appears with the same title. For example, one always finds "the gospel according to Matthew" (*euaggelion kata Mathaion*), never variants such as "Matthew's gospel" or "a story about Jesus" or "the gospel of Jesus"—any of which might have arisen had Matthew circulated independently. The present naming scheme was clearly devised for a collection containing multiple gospels, yet no titles appropriate to an independently circulating Matthew ever appear in the manuscripts. The same consistency of title applies to the other collections, and some of those titles also make sense only in the context of a collection. This is true of all of Paul's epistles, since the titles only indicate the addressees without naming Paul. It is also true of all of the numbered epistles.

The uniformity of titles is also striking because some of the titles are so unique that they can hardly have arisen spontaneously and coincidentally from different sources. For example, not only are the gospel titles appropriate for a collection of gospels, but also the formula "the gospel according to" followed by the evangelist's name (*kata*, plus accusative) is highly unusual in the ancient world. For another example, from the earliest manuscripts of Ephesians it appears that the original text of the book did not actually have the word "Ephesus" in it -- yet the title is always "to the Ephesians." If this book had circulated independently, it would not necessarily always have been associated with Ephesus. Another example is the Acts of the Apostles. Trobisch argues that this title is not so obviously suited to the text as to make it likely that multiple people came up with the same title independently. The book does not conform well to the contemporary literary genre of books called "acts," and the main subject of most of the book – Paul – is rarely called an "apostle" in the text. Given that Luke and Acts were companion pieces, if they ever circulated by themselves it is hardly plausible to suppose that such different titles could have arisen spontaneously, one naming the author and one naming the content, and each one not an obvious deduction from the content.

Yet another striking uniformity is the way the manuscripts all employ the same system of abbreviations, which scholars have termed the *nomina sacra* (literally, “holy names”). For example, the word “God,” θεος, is consistently written θς, and the word “Lord,” κυριος, is consistently written κς. Each abbreviation is typically identified as such by writing a horizontal line over it. There is some variation in the words that are abbreviated, even within a manuscript, but there are about 15 that are usually abbreviated this way, and some others are occasionally abbreviated in the same manner.

The particular features of the *nomina sacra* that are typical of New Testament manuscripts – and atypical of other manuscripts from the same era – are the practice of using the first and last letters (as opposed to just a few of the initial letters) and marking the abbreviations with a horizontal superscript line. This practice occurs also in the Christian copies of the Greek Old Testament. The use there of the abbreviation ki for *kurioi* (Lord) wherever the Hebrew text has *yhwh* (Yahweh, often translated LORD in modern English Bibles), is sharply divergent from contemporary Jewish practices of marking that divine name. Jewish manuscripts of Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible use various methods for representing the name Yahweh other than simply writing it out, but they never replace it with either the Greek word *kurioj* or an abbreviation of that word. (The appearance of *kurioj* for Yahweh in modern Greek editions of the LXX stems from Christian practice.) Therefore, it is clear that the *nomina sacra* did not arise because Christians adopted what they found in existing manuscripts of the Greek text of the Old Testament. Indeed, the practice may have a specifically Christian motivation behind it: Trobisch suggests that an intended effect of this scheme is to make it more obvious to the reader that Jesus is to be equated with Yahweh of the Old Testament, since the same title, *kurioj*, and the same abbreviation, *kj*, applies to both.

The *nomina sacra* contribute to the evidence that the New Testament manuscripts derive from a single archetype for several reasons besides the simple fact of their being so ubiquitous and consistent. Because they are so distinctive compared to all other contemporary abbreviation practices, it is unlikely that individual copyists adopting their own abbreviation schemes would all have ended up with the particular scheme or the degree of uniformity we see in the New Testament manuscripts. Also, in other manuscripts the goal of abbreviation is to reduce the amount of writing and save money by using smaller amounts of expensive parchment or papyrus. But in the New Testament manuscripts – and in Christian copies of the Old Testament – the number of words that are abbreviated is fairly limited, and those that are abbreviated are not chosen for being particularly long. These factors lead to the conclusion that the *nomina sacra* resulted from an editorial decision taken for a specific purpose.

Another common characteristic of early manuscripts of the New Testament and Christian copies of the Old Testament is the codex manuscript form (books formed by folding individual sheets of papyrus or parchment into quires and binding the quires together). Before the fourth century most manuscripts were produced as scrolls rather than codices. In the first two centuries AD, only about two percent of the manuscripts produced were codices. The codex form gained popularity later, but codices were still a small minority until they became predominant over the course of the fourth century. And yet with few exceptions all of our early manuscripts of the New Testament are codices. Once again, if books of the New Testament and the Christian Old Testament originally circulated separately we would have expected to see more early copies of them on scrolls, since that was the dominant form for the early centuries.

From all this evidence Trobisch reaches the conclusion that there was an original edition or archetype of the New Testament. It is commonly assumed that such a thing would have been impossible because the church did not have a world-wide organization that could promulgate a text and enforce its use everywhere. However, Trobisch points out that one need not assume a highly developed structure of ecclesiastical authority: a literary work that successfully presented itself as authoritative could spread far and wide on its own merits. And there is plenty of precedent for other such literary undertakings, some of them very successful and others less so:

The Canonical Edition was not the only work of the second century distributed specifically to Christians. There were Polycarp's edition of the Letters of Ignatius; Marcion's Bible; the Greek editions of Jewish Scripture published under the names of Theodotion, Aquila, and Symmachus; the Didache; the Letter of Barnabas; the Shepherd of Hermas; the Acts of Paul; and the Gospel of Thomas, to name only a few. They did not need an authoritative endorsement by the church to be produced, sold, bought, or read all over the Christian world. ... In my view, the fact that there is no record of a global church decision indicates that the *editio princeps* of the Canonical Edition was probably just one more ambitious Christian publication of the second century, one that faced strong competition.¹⁴

If, then, there was in fact an original edition of the New Testament, it stands to reason that the editor and publisher had some purpose in constructing the package. Trobisch calls this package the Canonical Edition because it includes the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Evidence of the editor's intent can be seen most directly in features of the edition that were clearly the result of editorial choices: the book titles, the composition of collection units, book order within collection units, the *nomina sacra*, and the codex form. These are all features of the manuscripts that must have been established by the editor of the collection rather than individual book authors.

¹⁴ *First Edition*, 43.

These features would be coordinated by the editor with the actual contents of the text in order to accomplish the objectives for which the collection was created. If we read the original edition as it is presented by the editor (as opposed to focusing on individual books separately and subjecting them to modern historical criticism, for instance) we should be able to discern elements of their overall purpose and plan. Thus, Trobisch proposes to read the New Testament from the standpoint of the impression it would make on its original readers, with special attention to the effect of editorial features.

Viewed this way, it appears that the package's creator designed it to be "self-authenticating." In other words, in the absence of a well-developed church hierarchy that could adjudicate disputes and enforce decisions, the editor found another way to achieve an authoritative effect: they created a collection of documents that presents itself as the unanimous voice of the original Christian leaders. In order to achieve this image of early Christian unanimity, one of the primary aims of the edition is to foster the impression that the split between Paul and the Jerusalem Christian leadership was resolved. Although even Paul himself near the end of his life apparently did not expect that his opponents would come around to his viewpoint, the final form of the New Testament strongly suggests they did just that.

The titles of the New Testament books include eight author names. All are identifiable from the texts themselves as authoritative early Christian leaders: Paul himself, disciples of Jesus (Peter, John, and Matthew), brothers of Jesus (James and Jude), and individuals explicitly identified as reliable disciples of one or more of these leaders (Mark and Luke).¹⁵ The choice of all eight names can be traced to an interest in portraying the split between Paul and the other apostles (Gal 2:1-14) as resolved. The evangelist names in particular do this while linking the collection units together.

Mark is presented as a disciple of both Paul and Peter. Though at one point he was the cause of strife (Acts 15:37-39), Peter's first epistle identifies Mark as "my son" (1 Pet 5:13), and the epistle that presents itself as Paul's testament names Mark as a person fully aligned with him (2 Tim 4:11). The name Mark therefore ties together Paul's epistles, the Four-Gospel Book, and the *Praxapostolos*.

The opening of Acts identifies its author as the same person who wrote Luke. Acts thoroughly binds together Peter and Paul as the primary apostles of a united Christianity,

¹⁵ It is true that some of these books provide only the first name of the author without specifically identifying the name in question as a particular famous individual. However, this fact is mainly of significance when one is interpreting a book as if it were an independent entity. Trobisch is analyzing the New Testament from the way a contemporary reader would have perceive it since the time it was distributed as a complete package. So, for example, even if the text of a book like James does not specifically identify the author as the brother of Jesus, the book's placement in the New Testament would make that a natural deduction for a reader of the New Testament.

focusing on Peter in the first half and Paul in the second half. The book presents Peter as the original advocate of Paul's approach to the Gentiles. And since Paul's epistles name Luke as a colleague of his (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11), this name too forms a link between the first three collection units.

The editorial addition of chapter 21 to the gospel of John identifies the author of that book as one of Jesus' disciples. The name John in the title links the gospel to the *Praxapostolos* by way of the Johannine general epistles and to the Pauline epistles since one of the "pillars" of Galatians 2:11 is named John.

The harmonizing tendency (interest in showing the Jerusalem Jewish apostles in full agreement with Paul) is most evident in the *Praxapostolos*. Acts itself is the story of an early Christianity that remains united despite temporary disputes over the issue of how much Jewish Law observance to require of Gentiles. And by an interesting coincidence, the first three authors of the general epistles happen to be the same "pillars" of the church that Paul names in Galatians (2:9) – and they are included in the same order (James, Peter, John). The epistle 2 Peter in particular, which presents itself as Peter's testament, has Peter fully endorsing Paul by calling Paul's epistles "scripture" (2 Pet 3:16).

Even the form of the titles attributed to the gospels stresses unity over disunity: the "gospel according to" form very effectively adopts Paul's stress on ensuring that no phraseology connected with the word "gospel" can allow for the slightest suggestion that there could be more than one gospel. "The gospel according to Matthew" accomplishes this where something simpler like "the gospel of Matthew" would not. Thus all four evangelists witness to different perspectives on one gospel, and do not represent different gospels. Therefore, it appears that the original edition of the New Testament was designed to be authoritative by representing the united voice of the original church founders, all of whom closed ranks around the Pauline gospel.

It is, of course, possible that this apparently united voice is a fiction created by the editor of the New Testament. The Jerusalem apostles may have continued to oppose Paul. In that case, aspects of the history in Acts that portray the apostles as in fundamental agreement will have been fabricated. Writings attributed to the apostles that clearly supply links between them (such as 2 Tim and 2 Pet) will have been heavily modified or even created from scratch for that purpose. Trobisch explicitly side-steps this issue, since his goal in this book is simply to determine the purpose of the Canonical Edition by determining the impression the edition would have on its readers. He does, however, point out that a lot of planning and effort went into the selection and cross-referencing of authoritative author names. For the edition to be received as intended – as an authoritative witness by reliable representatives of the original church leadership – the

editor would have to implicitly insist, and the readers would have to accept, that the authorship was genuine.

The assertion of genuineness may also have been behind the choice of the codex form, because codices were thought to be forgery-proof. A codex could hold more text than a scroll could, and you could not add to or remove books from a codex without it being evident, because pages would be numbered. If the New Testament were published as a collection of many scrolls, preventing the addition or removal of a scroll here and there would be difficult. But four collection units are recognizable as such, and within each collection unit no one could add or subtract units without their actions being discernible. Therefore the choice of the codex form fit perfectly a body of literature that was to be presented as scripture and which closes with dire warnings about adding anything to it or removing anything from it (Rev 22:18-19).

One possible motivation for creating such an authoritative document was to oppose Marcion. Marcion was a Christian leader of the second century who used the epistles of Paul to argue that the Hebrew Scriptures were irrelevant for Christians and that the loving God of Jesus was not the same as the wrathful God of the Jews. He created his own version of the Bible which excluded the Old Testament. He included selected epistles of Paul and a gospel that may have been related in some way to Luke.

Trobisch argues that part of the reason the New Testament was created was to attack Marcion's viewpoint. The Canonical Edition does this by including the Hebrew scriptures within it and clearly linking them to the Christian scriptures by naming the section that contains them the "Old Testament." That name makes it clear that the section that contains Jewish scriptures functions as a prologue to the section named "New Testament." Moreover, the method of using the same word and the same abbreviation for Yahweh in the Old Testament, and Lord (in reference to Jesus) in the New Testament, makes the correspondence between Yahweh and Jesus crystal clear. Thus, the Canonical Edition asserts that Marcion is wrong, by showing that Paul, in agreement with all of the early Christian authorities, endorsed the Jewish scriptures as Christian scripture.

From the makeup of the four-gospel book Trobisch proposes another editorial purpose as well. A debate about the correct date on which to celebrate Easter was threatening to split the church in the late second century. By including gospels that present contradictory timelines for Jesus' crucifixion, the editor of the Canonical Edition implicitly asserts that both views are valid – there can be differing perspectives on such matters within the limits of the one gospel. In other words, the unity of the gospel is dependent on its spirit and not on a literal reading of any individual's words written about it, even if those words are within scripture. (Trobisch suggests that this is one approach

to scripture that differentiates Christianity from Judaism and Islam, where exact wording of scripture is of paramount importance.)

After completing the presentation of the evidence and the reasoning that leads to these conclusions, Trobisch proposes a series of practical actions that modern scholars should take if his thesis is accepted as correct or likely to be correct. First, the uniformity of the early manuscript tradition makes it clear that there was an archetype with a specific sequence of books -- at the very least for each collection unit--and that sequence must have been intentional. Present-day Bibles have an arrangement of books that reflects a repackaging done in the Middle Ages (Paul's epistles were moved between Acts and the general epistles) and thus to some degree misrepresents the intent of the original arrangement. In the earliest manuscripts it is clear that Acts goes with, and functions as, an introduction to the general epistles, and modern Bibles should follow suit. By the same token, Hebrews should be located at the end of the Paul's epistles to congregations, which is its normal location in the oldest manuscripts.

Trobisch also suggests that the arrangement of Old Testament books in Christian Bibles, and the text of the Old Testament, should follow the manuscripts of the Canonical Edition rather than the Septuagint or Jewish manuscripts of the Hebrew scriptures. (This assumes that Christians would want their Bibles to be faithful to what was used in early Christianity rather than specifically the LXX or Jewish scriptures as used by Jews. The original text of the Old Testament in the Canonical Edition of the Bible was not one and the same as the LXX.) Trobisch also concludes that modern editions should mark the *nomina sacra* in some way so that modern readers can see the effect of these abbreviations. These proposals for repackaging modern Bibles are conservative and reasonable and simply involve being faithful to the text of the earliest and best manuscripts of the Bible.

The thesis about the creation of the Canonical Edition and the purposes behind it cannot be proved, but the evidence is strong and the reasoning is sound. Trobisch's case does have its weaknesses or areas in which further refinement would be helpful. A few manuscripts (such as P46 noted above) do not fit the book-order pattern. Other plausible reasons for Christian adoption of the codex have been advanced.¹⁶ And the uniqueness of the uniform titles and the *nomina sacra* in Biblical manuscripts would be more striking if it could be shown that other early Christian literature does not have such features. A number of early Christian literary works did circulate individually: do their manuscripts

¹⁶ Harry Gamble suggests that Paul's letter collection wouldn't fit on a scroll and the codex form was chosen for that reason, then it spread to the other Christian scriptures. *Books and Readers in the Early Church. A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 54-66.

show variation in the works' titles? Do *nomina sacra* appear in extra-Biblical literature? There is room for further work to be done.¹⁷

It may seem strange that a project conceived and enacted on such a grand scale as the Canonical Edition could go without notice by contemporary Christians and leave no external corroborating evidence. However, the fact that contemporary Christians knew nothing about the project could also fit the evidence perfectly. The profile of the Canonical Edition as proposed by Trobisch could actually demand a high degree of stealth on the part of those who created it. If they wanted to create a text that would be received as authoritative by all Christians, it would hardly advance their purpose to make their own involvement known. They were at the least involved in attributing existing literary works to authoritative figures of the past, and they may also have edited those works to suit their purposes. They could also have created some of the New Testament books themselves for the same reason. In such cases it could make sense for them to say as little as possible about what they were doing, and to present the finished product to their fellow Christians without saying anything about how it came into being.

This scenario brings to mind an aspect of the Trobisch thesis that the book does not address: the matter of pseudonymity or forgery. Modern New Testament scholars with few exceptions consider that many of the New Testament books are attributed to people who did not actually write them. Many scholars prefer to speak of these texts as “pseudonymous,” which does not have the negative connotations that would be inherent in calling them forgeries. It is common to assert that the modern reader who sees something morally reprehensible in such actions is being anachronistic since pseudonymity was common and accepted in the ancient world. It is said that an author who was writing a text faithfully in the spirit of his or her teacher would naturally attribute the text to the teacher out of humility and deference to the teacher.

However, this form of innocuous pseudonymity hardly fits the Trobisch scenario. If Romans through Galatians is Paul's “authorized recension,” it portrays a high degree of tension between Paul and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem right up to the end of Paul's days. The Canonical Edition then papers over that split to present a picture of unanimity among the apostles, in order to give itself an aura of authority. Acts in particular goes so far as to extend the picture of unanimity all the way back to the beginnings, as though the

¹⁷ Trobisch's book has been reviewed many times, and while no one has been able to dismiss it, other minor objections have been raised. For a particularly thorough review that includes a number of criticisms as well as praise, see the one by Parker in *Journal of Theological Studies* 53(2002):299-305. In Parker's recent *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) he observes that “While Trobisch's case is by no means proven, it deserves to be taken seriously, if only because it is a reminder of how few facts there are concerning the origins of the collection.” (251).

kind of acrimony we see evidence of in Paul's epistles never happened. This could represent a falsification of historical reality in order to win adherents in a theological conflict, which is a very different matter from faithfully reproducing the teachings of one's master. In this case, the word "forgery" with all its modern connotations would fit quite well, because names were falsely attributed to texts for the purpose of making texts seem more authoritative. Texts may also have been modified or even written from scratch to accomplish the same end. Trobisch acknowledges this issue but leaves it outside the scope of his book:

Next, I want to deal briefly with the Book of Acts, 2 Timothy, and 2 Peter, and point out some apparent parallels to the editorial concept of the final redaction. I will leave the question open as to whether these writings were part of the tradition and accepted without alteration, or whether they were heavily edited or even created by the editors of the Canonical edition. All of these answers are possible and can be supported by ancient parallels. Fortunately, my interpretation, which attempts to understand the text from the readers' perspective, would remain unaffected in any case. It can hardly be denied that the edition presents the separate writings as authentic.¹⁸

For Trobisch's goal of interpreting editorial intent, authenticity versus forgery may not be an issue, but for a historical reconstruction of early Christianity and the story of Jesus himself, the issue's significance can hardly be overestimated.

Another very interesting question that Trobisch skirts in this book has to do with the actual identity of the editor of the Canonical Edition. The amount of financial resources, and expertise, and prestige within the Christian community required to bring such a gigantic undertaking to a successful conclusion would have been enormous. The amount of text—including both Old and New Testament—was gigantic, and a successful publication required that multiple copies be created by the publisher, not just one archetype. The task of devising a whole new approach to handling divine names throughout both Old and New Testament required in-depth knowledge of scripture and an authoritative approach to handling scriptural texts. Trobisch does not address these issues in this book, but he does so in a text that he published later as an article.

Who Published the New Testament?

In an article published in 2008,¹⁹ Trobisch takes his investigation a few steps further in order to identify the individual who led the creation of the Canonical Edition. In this article he assembles a series of clues and then identifies the individual who best fits the profile suggested by the clues.

¹⁸ *First Edition*, 80.

¹⁹ "Who Published the Christian Bible," *Free Inquiry* 28(Dec 2007/Jan 2008):1:30-33. The writing style of Trobisch's books makes it clear that he wants his findings to be accessible to people outside academia. This article is written for the general reader to the same degree that Paul's Letter Collection is, and is published in a popular journal (*Free Inquiry* is published by the Council for Secular Humanism) rather than a refereed academic periodical.

One clue is the date of publication. The earliest Christians who wrote about books of the New Testament (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tatian) were active around the turn of the second to third century. Irenaeus quoted from the book of Acts to refute Marcion around 180 AD. One purpose of the Canonical Edition was to oppose Marcion, and the creation of Acts was probably connected with the creation of the canonical edition since Acts represents so strongly the edition's harmonizing tendency. Therefore Trobisch suggests that the New Testament was most likely published before 180 AD.

Having set the time frame, he proceeds to examine evidence in the text of the New Testament that might give clues as to the identity of its publisher. The first sort of clue would be an editorial note to the reader. Trobisch takes John 21:25 as such an editorial note, one that refers directly to the Four-Gospel Book, and by extension to the entire Canonical Edition:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

The point of this statement is that four gospels are enough; there is no need to continue to produce additional ones. Trobisch concludes from the first person statement "I suppose" that the publisher was not anonymous, and that the first readers of the edition would have known who he was. He therefore must have been famous at the time. This note also indicates that the publisher was personally connected to the book of John in some way, and had enough prestige or authority in the Christian community to include John as one of the gospels. Because the publisher included John in the Four-Gospel Book even though John disagreed with the synoptics about the date of Easter, it is clear that he did not create the edition in order to argue one side or the other in that controversy. Therefore, it is likely that he was on the side represented by John but was not an extreme partisan of that side.

Trobisch finds additional clues by looking at the books besides Acts that most closely reflect the harmonizing tendency of the Canonical Edition as a whole. These are 2 Timothy and 2 Peter. Most scholars recognize these to be forgeries; if they are so closely related to the purpose of the Canonical Edition they may have been created by the publisher himself. In that case, they may preserve geographical information that would allow us to determine where the publisher lived.

These two epistles present themselves as having been sent to Asia Minor. Since letter collections were often drawn from the archives of the addressee, it is the churches in Asia

Minor that would be expected to vouch for the letters' authenticity. Hence, that is the logical place of origin.

Taking all of these data into account, Trobisch proposes Polycarp of Smyrna as the person who best fits the profile. He was a well-known and authoritative figure in the early Christian community; he was a disciple of John; he was involved in the Easter controversy and took the lead in engineering an "agree to disagree" resolution to it; he vigorously opposed Marcion; and he was an experienced publisher, having published the letters of Ignatius. Trobisch concludes this line of reasoning by proposing that Polycarp published the New Testament sometime between 156 when Anicetus became bishop of Rome (Polycarp met with him to discuss the Easter controversy) and 168 when Polycarp was martyred.

He closes the article by offering what he believes may be corroborating evidence. The epistle 2 Timothy 4:9-20 contains a list of names, all but two of which are identifiable from other books of the New Testament. Names from existing literature are precisely the sort of thing a forger would include in a forgery to give it the appearance of authenticity, so they are easily explainable. The two extras are Carpus and Crescens. Carpus could be an allusion to Polycarp, and Crescens could be an allusion to Polycarp's scribe (who is identified as Crescens in the introduction to Polycarp's edition of the letters of Ignatius).

This thesis of this article is built upon a series of conjectures that are plausible to varying degrees but leave much room for doubt. The first-person remark in John 21:25 may or may not have been made by the publisher of the Canonical Edition and may or may not indicate that the individual is famous. If the individual was well known and expected that readers of the Canonical Edition would know who he was, it is inexplicable that no Christians anywhere ever wrote about what Polycarp was doing. Given Trobisch's other assertions that Acts is the book most representative of the publisher's harmonizing tendencies, it seems curious to say now that he is also responsible for John. The publisher may have created 2 Timothy and 2 Peter but they could just as easily have been forged by someone else, and the creator of the Canonical Edition may have modified parts of them to serve his ends. The names Carpus and Crescens in 2 Tim 4:19-20 are interesting, but other unique names appear in other parts of the epistle (such as Eubulus and Pudens in 4:21), and one may well wonder why Crescens would put his own name in a negative light as one of those who deserted Paul (4:10).

Trobisch does not overemphasize the certainty of his conclusion. He presents it as a conjecture based on reasonable suppositions, which it is. With no way to verify it any more than what Trobisch has done, it remains little more than a curiosity.

What goes beyond the status of mere curiosity in this article compared to the earlier books is the emphasis on the subject of forgery, which was explicitly avoided in the books. Here Trobisch neither avoids nor soft-pedals the morally questionable aspects of forgery. He makes the leap to assigning the origin of forgeries to the creator of the Canonical Edition, stresses that “A forgery is an authoritative document that lies about its true authorship,” and asserts that the authors of New Testament forgeries “intended to deceive readers about their true authorship.”

The suggestion that the New Testament includes pseudonymous or forged works is of course nothing new in modern scholarship. But what is new in the Trobisch world is the idea that the forgeries are not isolated cases of individuals forging individual books, or individuals trying conscientiously to reformulate the teaching of their master and humbly assigning the master’s name to their compositions. Instead, the entire New Testament is seen as a concerted effort by a master of deception to win a theological battle by appropriating the authority of revered personages. To that end, this person may have had no qualms about actually misrepresenting the positions of those personages (by making Paul’s opponents out to be his allies). Put another way, the New Testament text deliberately attempts to conceal one aspect of the history of early Christianity, and only an examination of the manuscripts has revealed the deception.

The Canonical Edition and the Historical Jesus

One need not agree with every aspect of Trobisch’s thesis to see that he has presented evidence of value to anyone who wishes to understand the New Testament. One practical application of the evidence is to the project of reconstructing Q and using it to learn more about “the historical Jesus.” Trobisch’s evidence adds weight to the criticisms Parker levels against that project.

If the New Testament was published by people who believed that the end justifies the means—people who would assign authoritative names to anonymous documents, edit existing documents, and possibly even create new forgeries, all to win a theological dispute—the text of the gospels would not have been exempt from their attention. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that there is so much contradictory evidence in the synoptic gospels: for every instance that a Q proponent can cite to prove his case, a Q opponent can provide another one that proves the opposite. One wouldn’t expect such confusion if Matthew and Luke were each straightforwardly using a single Mark and a single Q. However, this jumble of contradictory evidence makes sense if a single editor revised parts of the gospels’ text after gathering them together into a collection unit. Thus, even if Trobisch’s theory is just plausible -- let alone probable -- it undermines the foundational assumptions behind the reconstruction of Q even more effectively than Parker’s argument does.

The likelihood that editors did more than just conscientiously gather together pristine preexisting texts renders the whole project of discovering the historical Jesus more doubtful, just as it distances us from the historical Paul. This applies even if the editors worked within collection units rather than across the entire New Testament. And if the evidence for a single editor or publisher of the New Testament is strong – which it is – the evidence that such was the case for each collection unit is stronger yet.

The same possibility (deliberate editorial changes by a collection editor rather than each literary work being created and edited separately) opens new vistas on the interpretation of any individual book of the New Testament. Exegetes typically approach the New Testament books as separate literary works according to the “collection of books” paradigm. An approach that treats them as components of a collection that were placed in the collection for a purpose, and likely modified to suit that purpose by the creator of the collection, would in many cases result in different interpretations.

Such an approach would at the least recognize as questionable things that are now typically treated as certainty. In *New Testament Manuscripts*, Parker comments on Trobisch’s *First Edition*:

While Trobisch’s case is by no means proven, it deserves to be taken seriously, if only because it is a reminder of how few facts there are concerning the origins of the collection.²⁰

At first glance, the “if only” clause sounds makes the whole statement sound like a case of damning by faint praise. However, such an interpretation would underestimate the value of prompting people to question what they think they know, especially for the field of New Testament studies. What separates history from historical fiction or flights of fancy is the historian’s sober assessment of the reliability of sources and degrees of certainty in historical reconstructions. Taking both Parker and Trobisch seriously can help transform any New Testament scholar from a fantasy or fiction writer into a historian.

²⁰ *New Testament Manuscripts*, 251.