Manuscript Mystique: $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ A Canon of Petrine Authority for a Proto-Orthodox "Community"?[1]

Nycholas L. D. Oliveira | ORCiD: 0009-0001-1241-138X

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

nycholas.oliveira@tuks.co.za

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Abstract

The following study takes its cue from a body of literature that seeks to challenge the academic discourse on "religion" as transcendent, irreducible, and unique – sui generis. Naturally, a sui generis conception of religion also views religion's objects through a lens of transcendence and divine authority. These objects possess immense meaning potential and act as social mediators in particular social contexts. In both ancient and modern times, early Christian manuscripts are examples of such religious objects. They are evidence of the literary practices of early Christians and are windows into their social contexts, reflecting how these believers navigated their socio-cultural realities. Modern scholars often use these manuscripts as evidence to postulate the existence of homogeneous Christian communities that created these texts for their theological upliftment. However, are such postulations supported by the material evidence? This paper examines one case study where $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ has been propped up as a witness to the presence of a coherent unified proto-orthodox Christian community in the fourth century CE in Egypt. The following research concludes that extant evidence points to a socio-religious context of Egypt during this period that was remarkably complex; as such, the existence of such a community cannot be supported.

1. Introduction

From the quotidian discussions of common religious adherents to the academic study of religious phenomena, religion is widely viewed as something external of typical socio-political forces in human societies. Though it may interact with and be influenced by these forces, it is

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[1] This paper is intended to contribute to the theme of the conference, *Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam*, hosted by the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, on 30 June to 1 July 2023. This research was not presented then but emanates from research towards my MTh dissertation (University of Pretoria), some of which was presented at the conference.

not of them; it is its own thing, its own kind, it is sui generis.[2] This view of religion also, naturally, encompasses the objects of religion; as the material "stuff" of sui generis religion, they are necessarily endowed with a uniqueness of their own. Consequently, these objects are accorded an otherworldly level of authority and mystique that exempts them from the naturalistic conclusions of social-scientific study.[3] As a counterpoint to this, there are voices calling for an anthropocentric study of religion and its correlates, viewing religious phenomena as entirely human in origin, rather than emanating from something that is "more-than-human".[4]

Early Christian manuscripts (in the following I will abbreviate this to ECMs) are some of the most prized artefacts of the Christian religion. They contain the oldest witness to the "Word of God" and, therefore, bear a transcendental authority that lifts them out of their human context, elevating them to the realm of the supernatural. Following the scholarship on sui generis religion, this essay will seek to show how the academic study of these manuscripts has, at times, contributed to their mystique and subsequent exaltation, resulting in uncritical and untenable (and unhelpful?) conclusions. As an example of this, I will offer a critique of a recent academic paper by Phillip D. Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$: What an Ancient Manuscript Can Tell Us about the Epistles of Peter and Jude." While only a single paper, it is a useful case study that highlights well the normative slippage, which occurs across New Testament scholarship, namely, the subliminal recourse to ideologically homogenous Christian communities as the primary custodians and proliferators of Christian literature. This apparent mystique of ECMs unfortunately obscures their literary contexts; in this case, $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ and its social and literary context.

2. $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$: Description and Important Issues

$\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ is the nomenclature given to what may well be the earliest known copies of Jude and 1–2 Peter, paleographically dated to the third and possibly up to the fourth centuries CE.[5]

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[2] For the concept of sui generis religion, this research relies on several works, cited below, by Russell T. McCutcheon. For how sui generis religion connects to Christianity and its texts, a recent collection of essays by Willi Braun, also cited below, will form the basis of the discussion.

[3] In the preface to his essay collection, Willi Braun laments the "preservationist" tactics employed by many in the critical study of the Bible, to safeguard it as a "sacred text whose principal *raison d'être* is to stand, fetish-like, as the foundational and highest authority in matters moral, ritual, or theological." Even in the use of social theories, which carry certain implications, Braun is concerned that the attitude is preservationist, Willi Braun, *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020), xi. Ward Blanton and Yvonne Sherwood say it well, "'Adapted' and softened versions of literary and social theories seem specifically designed to allow biblical scholars to steal the cache of theory and yet escape the 'cost'," Ward Blanton and Yvonne Sherwood, "Bible/Religion/Critique" in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York, NY; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2017), 44.

[4] See Braun, *Jesus and Addiction to Origins*, xi

[5] Pasquale Orsini, *Studies on Greek and Coptic Majuscule Scripts and Books*, Studies in Manuscript Cultures 15 (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2019), 39. See chapter 2 for a full palaeographical analysis of the Bodmer Papyri.

However, far from being neutral, this labelling convention has resulted in several unfortunate consequences: Firstly, it obscures the literary context of these texts by separating them from their literary relationship to other "non-canonical" texts in the same codex, known as the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex (BMC). Secondly, "$\mathfrak{P}^{72}$" gives the impression that the letters of Peter and Jude were one contained textual unit in the codex, an impression that has been challenged by Brent Nongbri.[6] Thirdly, this designation contributes to what is already a narrow focus of biblical scholarship namely, the preference for "canonical" Christian writings as objects of study, which has played a significant role in obscuring our view of early Christian literary habits particularly, and consequently, early Christianity in general.

The final form of the BMC has been dated to the fourth century CE and comprises the following writings in order: The Protoevangelium of James (Nativity of Mary), a correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians (3 Corinthians), the 11th Ode of Solomon, Jude, Melito's homily on the passion, a hymn fragment, the Apology of Phileas, Psalms 33–34 (LXX), and 1–2 Peter (see appendix A).[7] It should also be noted that the BMC forms part of a larger collection, known as the Bodmer Papyri, which is a heterogenous library of manuscripts that contains both Christian and classical Greek literature; in some cases, these are bound together in a single codex. Depending on which inventory one prefers, the exact ratio (Christian versus classical Greek) will vary. Nevertheless, in all known inventories, one can find

Reliance on palaeographical dating should always be cautious, as is persuasively argued by Brent Nongbri, who, through a string of publications has problematised the earlier dating that is often given to the oldest Christian papyri. Unfortunately, manuscript mystique plays a significant role here; the older a copy of a New Testament text is, the closer it is to the original composition, the nearer it is to the events described, the more reliable it is as a witness to Jesus and the earliest Christians, and therefore, the greater authority it possesses. For problems related to the palaeographical dating of arguably the most famous papyrus fragment of the New Testament, $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$, see Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P ^{52}: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *HTR* 98, no. 1 (2005): 23–48, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000842; Brent Nongbri, "Palaeography, Precision and Publicity: Further Thoughts on *P.Ryl.* III.457 (P52)," *New Testament Studies* 66, no. 4 (2020): 471–499, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688520000089.

[6] See Brent Nongbri, "The Construction of P.Bodmer VIII and the Bodmer 'Composite' or 'Miscellaneous' Codex," *Novum Testamentum* 58, no. 4 (2016): 410, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685365-12341535. Nongbri concluded that codicological relationship between 1–2 Peter and Jude was secondary. See also Orsini *Studies on Greek and Coptic Majuscule Scripts and Books*, 43, who feels that 1–2 Peter are only "in some way connected" to the other writings in the BMC. However, Tommy Wasserman previously suggested that these texts may indeed have had a primary relationship, with 1–2 Peter following immediately after Jude, but possibly in a prior codex, Tommy Wasserman, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex," *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 1 (2005): 145–147, https://doi.org/ 10.1017/S0028688505000081. Part of the difficulty here is the sense of certainty, on the part of modern scholarship, regarding the literary relationships between the three epistles. This perceived relationship informs views about how these writings were copied together and travelled as textual units. On their relationship, Jeremy Hultin's analysis reflects that what seems obvious is not always necessarily so, Jeremy F. Hultin, "The Literary Relationships among 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude," in *Reading 1--2 Peter and Jude: A Resource for Students*, ed. Eric F. Mason and Troy W. Martin, Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study 77 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 27–45.

[7] Since the codex was disassembled prior to its publication, this is a hypothetical reconstruction. In my dissertation, I attempt an up-to-date discussion of the main literature concerning $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ and the BMC, Nycholas Oliveira, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex: A Study of the Dynamics of Early Christian Identity Formation" (M.Th. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2023).

this amalgam.[8] This mixture has implications for our understanding of both this specific collection, but also for the wider conversation about "canon," which is often unwittingly retrojected onto ancient readers who were either unaware of or largely unconcerned with it.[9] This retrojection thus calls into question the issue of how modern scholarship *constructs* history rather than reconstructing it.

3. History and Meaning

Elucidating his approach to historiography in *Theology of the New Testament*, Udo Schnelle incisively notes that "[t]he past event itself is not available to us, but only the various understandings of the past events mediated to us by various interpreters. Things do not become what they are for us until we ascribe meaning to them. History is not reconstructed, but unavoidably and necessarily *constructed*" (italics original).[10] This construction is the natural result of our – human beings – pursuit for meaning, especially through our recollections of the past. However, whether we wish it or not, our recollections (our records of history and how we order those records) are grounded in our own experience and are drawn from our own perspectives and, therefore, are thoroughly subjective.[11] Furthermore, we cannot opt in nor opt out of our pursuit for meaning; it has an ontological basis, coded (in a manner of speaking) into our very being.[12]

From a modern perspective, our "history of early Christianity" is something of a construction too, laden with existential meaning. We draw this meaning from historical sources that managed to survive time's erosion of physical things; they too, these sources, contain constructed histories, which are eminently subjective. In their historical constructions, modern scholars of Christianity arrange, preference, study, and interpret these sources retrospectively, adding yet a further layer of subjectivity.[13] That being the case, in the

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[8] See appendices A and B for tabulated representations of the BMC and the Bodmer Papyri respectively.

[9] See the following: David Brakke, "Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity: Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, eds. David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2012), 263–280; Jennifer Knust, "Miscellany Manuscripts and the Christian Canonical Imaginary," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes,* 2017, Vol. 13, Ritual Matters: Material Remains and Ancient Religion (2017): 102, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44898621; Jens Schröter, "The Use of »Canonical« and »Non-canonical« Texts in Early Christianity and its Influence on the Authorization of Christian Writings," in *Authoritative Writings in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Their Origin, Collection, and Meaning*, eds. Tobias Nicklas and Jens Schröter, WUNT 441 (Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 129–164, https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-158992-8.

[10] Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2009), 29–30.

[11] Markus Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023), vii.

[12] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 30. See also Per Linell, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically: Interactional and Contextual Theories of Human Sense-Making,* Advances in Cultural Psychology: Constructing Human Development (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2009), 221–224.

[13] Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity*, 4.

conclusion to his book, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings*, Markus Vinzent cautions that it "is not only a matter of becoming aware of our own constructiveness of historiography but also of the multiple constructions that precede our construction and heavily influence us."[14] However, even if history is not reconstructed but constructed, it is so because, to varying degrees, it is based on events that evidently took place at certain points in history.[15] But as Schnelle has put it, when "the present passes into the past, it irrevocably loses its character as reality."[16] All that remains of a present that is passed is our subjective recollection of it and the meaning we form from it.

Meaning-formation does not stand alone; rather, it is inextricably tied to the formation of identity (both individual and collective) which is in turn reinforced by the creation and appropriation of "symbolic universes" that function to "legitimize social structures, institutions, and roles; that is, they explain the basis for things as they are … they enable both synchronic coherence and the diachronic placement of individuals and groups in an overarching historical framework; that is, they provide a framework of meaning."[17] A coherent (subjective) narrative girds our symbolic universes by systemising the "chaotic contingency" of our lived experiences, both past (through memory) and present; in doing so, narrative provides a convincing framework through which identity can be reified.[18] It is from a coherent narrative, which stabilises identity, that individuals and groups develop their "ethical and pedagogical consciousness."[19] These brief comments on history and meaning-formation are given as a foundation for understanding the mystique of manuscripts – these religious objects are constitutive of modern Christianity's symbolic universe and give substantial moral and ethical force, as well as coherence to its historical narrative.

4. Religion and Its Objects

Over the years, Russell McCutcheon has consistently attempted to challenge the status quo of "religion" (especially in academia) as an irreducible and fundamental characteristic of reality – something "out there," discovered by a privileged group of knowing humans, while still waiting to be found by yet-to-be-enlightened others – as opposed to something that is

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[14] Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity*, 338. The goal of Vinzent's book is to show how the history of Christian origins was represented in early sources from the subjective perspective of their authors and, therefore, was less history as it actually happened, and more history as it was imagined and required for the structural integrity of an ideological framework. Awareness of this leads Gerhard van den Heever to reflect that history is not so much the content of a historical narrative; rather, it is the very act of narration that is the history. Therefore, "critical historiography of Christianity is the study of the social, cultural, and ideological performances encoded in the literary artifacts as such constituting the *imagined* tradition" (italics original). See Gerhard van den Heever, "Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions: Afterlives and Transformations—A Response," *Journal of Early Christian History* 10, no. 2 (2020): 110–111, https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2021.1928526.

[15] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 28–29; Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity*, 3–4.

[16] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 28.

[17] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 36.

[18] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 36–38.

[19] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 38.

"manufactured" out of the raw materials of other human processes and also for the future preservation of those same processes. In his important book *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, he writes, "This book is unapologetically reductionistic, for it advocates a naturalist, historical scale, where all human events and conceptual or textual productions – in a word, discourses – are understood to have socioeconomic and political origins and implications."[20] McCutcheon's concern is how scholars of religion, by insisting on a framework of transcendence ("sacred") for the study of religion, maintain certain social and political power balances.[21] Therefore, in his framework, religion and its contents are reduced from transcendence to contingence; religion is not divinely given, but fashioned by humans, for humans. This is an important effort, for while it may be expedient to locate religion's beliefs, practices, and objects in the realm of the sacred, it also comes with a significant price – the complete decontextualisation and alienation of these things from their human social worlds.[22]

A glaring example of this is the mystique that is attached to ECMs. These artefacts are vested with supernatural power and quality, the mysteries of which can only be divined through "Divine" guidance. It is similar for the question of their survival in the sands of time, a theory of "Divine" providence is preferred over the most obvious and banal explanation – the dry climate of Egypt. While climate may sometimes be acknowledged,[23] the extraordinary authority of these manuscripts is supported by an argument from "historical amnesia," to use McCutcheon's term.[24] By way of example, for many Christians (myself included at a certain time in my life), the sheer number of Christian manuscript survivals, as compared with those of the Greek classics (Homer, Thucydides, Plato, etc.) is evidence enough for the "reliability of Scripture." Recalling McCutcheon's concern over the power status quo, influential books like *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell, relied heavily on this apparent numerical supremacy,[25] while forgetting (or conveniently ignoring?) that so much of ancient Greek literature does not survive because of the iconoclastic behaviour of early Christians. These believers carried out an aggressive "assault on the past" when they

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[20] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

[21] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 18–19, 22–23. As such, it is imperative for scholars of religion to reflect on how they use the term "religion" and how they may inadvertently impose a modern conception of religion on an ancient context that would not recognise said conception. For further discussion, see Gerhard van den Heever, "Revisiting the Death/s of Religions," *Religion & Theology* 29, no. 1–2 (2022): 146–152, https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10038.

[22] Russell T. McCutcheon, "'The Field, at the Moment, Is Up for Redefinition': Twenty-Five Years of *Manufacturing Religion*," *MTSR* 35, no. 2–3 (2023): 271, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10088.

[23] Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Singapore: IMprint Edition, Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 2006), 18.

[24] McCutcheon, "'The Field, at the Moment, Is Up for Redefinition,' 274.

[25] McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 33–38. In these pages, McDowell offers tabulated representations to show how much better off Christian literature is than the Greek classics.

"smashed statues and temples, defaced paintings and burned 'pagan' books, in an orgy of effacement of previous culture that lasted for several centuries. It has been estimated that as much as 90 per cent of the literature of antiquity perished in the onslaught."[26] Despite this, it is still believed and confidently trumpeted that the NT's numerical advantage and smaller time gap between a historical event and its written record is somehow indubitable evidence of the veracity of Christianity's version of history. In reality, however, this wanton destruction undercuts the very argument that is being attempted – because Christians destroyed vast amounts of Classical Greek literature, such comparisons are simply non-starters.[27]

This mystique of religion and its artefacts is explicitly challenged by Willi Braun's recent essay collection, *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*. Using Bruce Lincoln's definition, Braun defines religion in a way that succinctly summarises the problems highlighted in the previous paragraph: Religion is the "ordinary and mundane discourses…" that are distinguished "by an orientation to speak of matters transcendent (i.e., beyond the limited spaces of this material world) and eternal (i.e., beyond the limits of time) in a way that inheres these matters with an authority that is correspondingly transcendental and eternal.[28] Religion is, therefore, a range of mundane human activities (textual productions and so on) which have been given discursive power through signification and the ascription of authority.[29] This is crystal clear in the apologetic declaration of Edward Glenny, as quoted by McDowell, regarding the mass of surviving NT literature, "*God* has given *us* 5,656 manuscripts containing all or parts of the Greek NT. It is the most remarkably preserved book in the ancient world" (italics mine).[30] Ironically, what is remarkable is not the indisputable evidence but, rather, the arrangement of such evidence in a fashion that ultimately props up the theological symbolic universe which gives existential meaning to so many.

Because religion and its contents are so often imbued with a "more than…" genetic quality, Braun and William Arnal advocate for "religion" to remain the domain of "those who know what it is" (theologians and the like); rather, they argue, the secular academy should

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[26] Anthony C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy: Three Millennia of Thought From the West and Beyond* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2019), 3. However, a caveat is requisite here; this iconoclasm, following official religious censorship under the Roman Emperor Theodosius, was largely perpetuated by Christian leaders but resisted at other levels of society, such as the in the domestic sphere. For the dynamics of this in Egypt, see David Frankfurter, "Iconoclasm and Christianization in Late Antique Egypt: Christian Treatments of Space and Image," in *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, eds. Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter, RGRW 163 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 137–159; David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Martin Classical Lectures (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 44–45, 233–241.

[27] If the reader is interested, see also the debate between Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace, where the latter employs the numbers game as evidence in the affirmative for the question, "Can We Trust the Text of the NT?", which was the subject of the 2011 debate: https://youtu.be/WRHjZCKRIu4?si=Mv9X0oMKbsKrBON7.

[28] Willi Braun, "Religion: A Guide," in *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020), 10.

[29] Willi Braun, "Religion: A Guide," 10–11.

[30] McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 36.

content itself with naturalistic and social-scientific studies of the correlates, processes, and products of the things typically marked as "religious."[31] Certainly, it might be argued that all things so designated as "religious" also fall under the purview of those who know what they are; for, it might be claimed, these products (like ECMs) rightfully belong to them. However, Arnal and Braun offer their rebuttal, "To theologians may belong the category, the demarcating circle of Religion, but such a concession does *not* imply their exclusive ownership of the stuff – the heterogeneous, quotidian human *arts de faire* – that they may place *in* that circle" (italics original); after all, these objects are the inheritance of humanity in general, not only those "religious" humans.[32]

To be sure, this approach to religious objects like ECMs may cause consternation on the part of some for whom these manuscripts carry an existential meaning potential.[33] The fear is that if we study these texts through a humanistic lens, we will strip them of their "Divine" qualities, making them no more than human artefacts which, therefore, will have no more authority than other human artefacts. Such a fear is understandable and it is easy to see how psychologically destabilising this may be, a disequilibrium of which I have first-hand experience. However, if we persist in restricting intellectual curiosity for fear that we might inadvertently and ultimately "kill the power of the gods,"[34] surely, at best, we will limit our understanding of early Christianity, and at worst, engage in outright obfuscation (while maintaining unholy power dynamics?).

It must be said, endeavouring to understand the creation and proliferation of ECMs anthropocentrically, as Braun would advocate, is not born of a desire to gut the Christian house of meaning, to use Schnelle's imagery;[35] rather, the goal is to understand why Christianity's house(s) was and is built in a particular way – to study "the *human interests in representing texts (or anything else) as divine rather than human* and the historical, social, and political effects of these representations" (italics original).[36] In fact, instead of harbouring nefarious motives, this approach is intrinsically positivistic; it is attempting to reach up to the heavens (in a manner of speaking) to bring the ECMs back down to earth and firmly

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[31] William E. Arnal and Willi Braun, "The Irony of Religion," in *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020), 19–20.

[32] Arnal and Braun, "The Irony of Religion," 20.

[33] For more on the meaning potential of artefacts, see Linell, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically*, 345–350.

[34] Willi Braun, "Introducing Religion," in *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020), 27.

[35] Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 27.

[36] Braun, "Introducing Religion," 27, 35.

contextualise them among the humans that produced them.[37] Rather than diminishing their true value, this enterprise is one of greater (re)valuation and unadulterated (re)contextualisation, something I recall is a sort of mantra among biblical exegetes: "Context, context, context!"

5. Manuscript Mystique: $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ as A Case Study

For this section, I will juxtapose two authors, both of whom have written articles directly related to the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex and $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$. However, each of these authors draw significantly opposing conclusions regarding these manuscripts. In 2017, Jennifer Knust wrote a paper titled, "Miscellany Manuscripts and the Christian Canonical Imagery." Also in 2017, Phillip Strickland published "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$: What an Ancient Manuscript Can Tell Us about the Epistles of Peter and Jude." As the reader will soon come to see, the contrasting opinions have to do with what was discussed in section 3 above – the subjectivity of the scholar's historical construction. Recalling Schnelle, the formation of cogent meaning out of "chaotic contingency" is an ontological and fundamentally subjective enterprise.

I begin with several highlights from Knust's article. She introduces her discussion with an appeal to how objects function as "social mediators."[38] Speaking about New Testament writings, she observes that these texts are the products of particular social contexts, but they also function as mediators of those contexts and subsequent ones, including in modern times.[39] Helpfully, Knust considers the BMC (along with three other codices) in its literary context, the larger Bodmer Papyri (or Dishna Papers), and she emphasises the combination of Christian canonical and apocryphal writings with classical Greek literature. From her perspective, this collection reflects that early Christians were not rigidly bound to a canonical framework; rather, they engaged a broad spectrum of literature, which in some cases was in theological tension.[40] Knust concludes her article with comments that I think are best quoted in full:

> Texts are bound up in the lived lives of human actors who copied them, used them, and wore them out, not so that a transcendent set of canonical books could (finally) be produced and preserved for some future Christian capable of exploiting their deep well of authority but so that specific circles of readers could amass a shared sense of having

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[37] See William Arnal's celebration of Braun's work, William E. Arnal, "Reification, Religion, and the Relics of the Past," in *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020), 181–188.

[38] See also Linell, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically*, 347.

[39] Knust, "Miscellany Manuscripts," 99.

[40] Knust, "Miscellany Manuscripts," 105. Schröter, "The Use of »Canonical« and »Non-canonical« Texts in Early Christianity," 138, highlights that "the social reality as it is reflected in canonical and non-canonical texts points to a great variety of early Christian beliefs and practices." And again, on page 145, after considering evidence from the Gospel of Thomas, "the 'New Testament' in ancient and medieval Christianity was surrounded by a wide range of texts that for 'ordinary Christians' were of no less importance than those writings which eventually formed the New Testament."

been set apart, properly educated, and identifiable as a group. In this sense, the Dishna miscellanies … unlock a world of texts and readers that remain mysterious nonetheless. As embodiments of the technologies and social relations of some ancient Egyptian reading circle, they materially mediate the desires and textual priorities of that group.[41]

What is important about this approach is its preference for studying ancient manuscripts within their wider literary and social context, without recourse to "Divine" providence. There is a greater reliance on the available material evidence and less import given to inference, which goes a long way in guarding against anachronistic and imaginative hypotheses regarding the social function of ancient artefacts, particularly NT texts.

In the conclusion to his article, Phillip Strickland makes an intriguing comment, one that leaves the reader wondering if he is uncertain about the degree to which his deductions might be imaginative. He writes, "In any historical reconstruction, some ability to use one's imagination is always necessary; and admittedly, some reconstructions tend to be more *imaginative* than others" (italics original).[42] It appears that this statement is intended as a caution against drawing too certain conclusions from limited data, which is always an important caveat. Nevertheless, in my reading of this article, and with respect to Strickland, I could not escape the sense that his conclusions were rather imaginative themselves.[43] Below, I list several observations that appear problematic to me.

Where Knust is more cautious in situating the Bodmer Papyri in the context of a particular community,[44] Strickland is quick to posit the existence of an ideologically coherent proto-orthodox Christian community.[45] This community, according to Strickland, stands in contrast with another ideologically coherent Christian group, namely, the gnostic community that owned the famous Nag Hammadi codices; these two Coptic communities held diametrically opposing theological perspectives. In this scenario, the "proto-orthodox Christians" who owned the BMC competed theologically, in the discursive environment, with the "heretical gnostic group" who owned the Nag Hammadi codices, especially over the issue of Petrine canonical authority.[46] For Strickland, the presence of 1–2 Peter and Jude, as well as an additional copy of 1 Peter in the Crosby-Schøyen codex, is evidence of this proto-orthodox

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[41] Knust, "Miscellany Manuscripts," 114.

[42] Phillip D. Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72: What an Ancient Manuscript Can Tell Us about the Epistles of Peter and Jude," *JETS* 60, no. 4 (2017): 790, https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/files_JETS-PDFs_60_60-4_JETS_60_4_781-791_Strickland.pdf.

[43] I say this with respect to Phillip Strickland as a fellow scholar, whose paper was incredibly helpful in getting me acquainted with the issues and research pertaining to $\mathfrak{P}$72 and the BMC; I am indebted to him. Unfortunately, I have not had the privilege of interacting with him, but perhaps in the near future we can meet to discuss these important artefacts.

[44] She writes that four codices she studied, "offer striking evidence of the diverse literary tastes of some *group(s?)* of late antique Christian readers…" (italics mine), Knust, "Miscellany Manuscripts," 101.

[45] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 783.

[46] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 786–787.

"community's devotion to the NT's Petrine tradition."[47] Their "devotion" can be compared with the similar "affinity" of the gnostic group with Peter, "just not anything of Peter from the NT"; several texts associated with Peter in the Nag Hammadi codices are proof for Strickland that the latter community was convinced that their origins traced back to the apostle Peter.[48] The proto-orthodox, according this gnostic group, could not claim such a heritage. Strickland concludes that "these communities had a stark difference of opinion over what constituted genuine, authoritative Petrine tradition, and orthodoxy in general."[49] Finally, it is imperative to point out that Strickland's hypothesis is couched in the presumed importance of "canon" for early Christians, which is problematised by Knust. While acknowledging the complexities surrounding the concept,[50] he sees the presence of 1–2 Peter and Jude in the BMC as "evidence of a still-forming canonical process for this particular Egyptian Christian community, especially in regard to Jude."[51]

In Strickland's historical construction, we are introduced to two Christian communities, one proto-orthodox (presumably the "good guys"?) and one "heretical gnostic" (obviously the "bad guys"!). Aside from this simplistic binary separation, which does not sit comfortably with the available material evidence (as Knust's article compellingly shows), there is the uncritical assumption of the existence of a very specific ideologically homogeneous community of early Christians that owned $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ and the BMC. However, their ownership of these manuscripts would, by implication, mean that they owned the rest of the literature in the Bodmer Papyri. This begs the question, what would Strickland make of the Menander texts, among others, in this collection? Did these proto-orthodox Christians own and read them as well? In his article (footnote 6), Strickland refers to James Robinson's inventory, which contained this mixture of Christian and classical Geek texts, yet, so far as I can tell, he says nothing on the subject. Perhaps he was convinced by Robinson's proposal that these texts entered the Pachomian monastery as the largess of wealthy individuals who joined the order at some point (see below)? Unfortunately, the answer to that question will evade us for the time being. Nevertheless, the very contents of the Bodmer Papyri cast doubt on Strickland's idealistic portrayal of this proto-orthodox Christian community.

With regard to early Christian source texts, this appeal to "community as a deep social and mental coherence, a commonality in mind and practice" has been strongly opposed.[52] Stanley Stowers has made five critical observations on the use of the term "community" in

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[47] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 789.

[48] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 789.

[49] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 790.

[50] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 781.

[51] Strickland, "The Curious Case of $\mathfrak{P}$72," 787.

[52] Stanley Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *MTSR* 23, no. 3 (2011): 238, https://doi.org /10.1163/157006811X608377.

modern scholarship of early Christianity.[53] Following him, I will use his insights as a basis for critiquing what I see as the manuscript mystique in Strickland's article.[54]

Firstly, Stowers criticises the lack of evidence offered to support the existence of a "highly cohesive" community "with commonality in belief and practice."[55] The strength of Strickland's portrayal of such a community is implicitly drawn from the Pachomian ownership hypothesis,[56] famously championed by James Robinson. On the basis of several Pachomian letters that appeared on the antiquities market around the same time (1950s) as the other manuscripts in the larger find, Robinson ascribed the ownership of the Bodmer library to Pachomian monks.[57] While popular, Robinson's thesis has recently experienced considerable resistance and, perhaps, no longer enjoys as much popularity. For example, that Pachomian monks would have owned, much less read and engaged with classical Greek literature, has been firmly dismissed by Jean-Luc Fournet, Gianfranco Agosti, and Alberto Camplani.[58] As alluded to above, Robinson proposed that this literature, and other well-produced codices, might have been generously donated to the monastery by wealthy individuals joining the order.[59] Certainly, this may have been the case, but not all have not found such a scenario convincing. In fact, just a cursory scan of the scholarship pertaining to the Bodmer Papyri will reveal that there is simply not enough evidence to be certain about their exact provenance, neither their context in history nor the exact location of the find.[60] As Brent Nongbri averred,

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[53] While Stowers's main focus is on a much earlier time, when the Gospels and Paul's letters were written, he recognises that scholars may uncritically adopt the concept of a coherent community with regard to literature that is dated to later centuries. Additionally, even though his primary concern may be on the composition of texts, I believe his criticisms are valid for the current discussion, which centres around copies of writings.

[54] I will only highlight three of his critiques as one observation is extensively discussed by Robyn Walsh, to whom I will refer shortly. Two of his observations, to my mind, can be helpfully combined, which will be done as my third and final critique.

[55] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 245.

[56] Strickland, "The Curious Case of 𝔓72," 784.

[57] James M. Robinson, *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri: From the First Monastery's Library in Upper Egypt to Geneva and Dublin* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 133–134. For a discussion and refutation of Robinson's inclusion of the Pachomian letters, see Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2018), 214–216.

[58] See Jean-Luc Fournet, "Anatomie d'une bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive: l'inventaire, le faciès et la provenance de la 'Bibliothèque Bodmer'," *Adamantius* 21 (2015): 16–17; Gianfranco Agosti, "Poesia greca nella (e della?) Biblioteca Bodmer," *Adamantius* 21 (2015): 96–97; Alberto Camplani, "Per un profilo storico-religioso degli ambienti di produzione e fruizione dei Papyri Bodmer: contaminazione dei linguaggi e dialettica delle idee nel contesto del dibattito su dualismo e origenismo," *Adamantius* 21 (2015): 134.

[59] Robinson, *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri*, 155.

[60] I have taken up this issue more extensively in my master's dissertation, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex," 37–43. After surveying the literature, I write concerning the Bodmer Papyri (pages 42–43), "the internal evidence … does not afford us an easy picture of whoever owned them. What we can say with relative certainty about the collector(s) is that they were (1) educated in both Christian and Classical literature, versed in multiple languages, (2) they displayed variegated literary interests, (3) and were therefore not monolithic, neither ideologically nor socially."

"Until some semblance of a consensus is reached on the contents of the Bodmer Papyri, its ancient context will continue to remain in question."[61]

A second contention that Stowers raises relates to "normative theological concepts parading as descriptive and explanatory social concepts."[62] In other words, scholars are often guilty of a normative ideological slippage, tending to see what they expect to see – such as the simplistic "orthodox community" or "gnostic community" description of the socio-religious milieu into which Christianity was born. As already discussed, our arrangement of historical sources and the resulting historiography often fall victim to profound subjectivity, hence Vinzent's call for self-awareness.[63] Going back to Strickland, that $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ so quickly and so certainly becomes a hypothetical community's monument to canonical Petrine authority seems to me to be a case of such subjectivity. This slippage is unsurprising, especially if the opinio communis – that Christian texts were produced by and for Christian communities – is rather intractable.[64]

In her persuasive book, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture*, Robyn Walsh contributes significantly to the task of tackling preconceived notions about the existence of unified coherent Christian communities.[65] Walsh sets out to demonstrate that Christian writings, like the Gospels, were typical, as opposed to atypical or exceptional, productions of the Greco-Roman literary culture at the time.[66] Like other Greek authors, the writers of these biographical accounts of Jesus's life, were influenced by social networks of similarly educated readers and writers.[67] Rather than being written for the theological needs of particular homogenous communities, the Gospels and their writers were primarily shaped by participation in literary networks of "elite cultural producers."[68]

Like Stowers, her primary concern is earlier *composition*s of Christian literature; however, I think there is relevance for later periods too, when copies were made and used. For example, Walsh's research would be consonant with Kim Haines-Eitzen's view that the BMC was the

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[61] Nongbri, *God's Library,* 238.

[62] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 245–246.

[63] Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity*, 338.

[64] On this Stowers, writes, "For Paul and other early Christian writers, Christian community is a normative idea; so also for modern Christians. This may be quite fine, but holding to this normative status is not a practice that contributes to the normalization of the study of ancient Christianity in the non-sectarian academy." See Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 246.

[65] Her book arises out of her PhD dissertation, which was fittingly supervised by Stanley Stowers.

[66] Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13, 17. See also Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 247–249.

[67] Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 109–110.

[68] Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 17.

product of private scribal networks.[69] In a programmatic chapter of her book *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature*, Haines-Eitzen details how literature was disseminated in the ancient world, both Christian and classical.[70] She notes that aside from commercial means of obtaining written texts, in the second and third centuries, "private settings remained the primary mode of circulation. If one wished to acquire a copy of a text, the most valuable resource was a circle of literate friends…"[71] Haines-Eitzen concludes that the BMC was the product of such a circle or network, being copied and compiled according to their literary and theological interests.[72] Similarly, Walsh argues that "ancient writers were engaged in an intellectual practice that made their literary circle of fellow writers their most significant and formative social group – that is, the social group with whom the author shared significant and reciprocal 'common values.'"[73] It is interesting, and perhaps telling, that Strickland does not make use of Haines-Eitzen's work in his paper. He certainly would have been aware of it since he cites research that explicitly refers to Haines-Eitzen's findings.[74] Perhaps, if he had engaged with Haines-Eitzen, his hypothetical proto-orthodox community may have stood on less secure footing.

Analogously, Sabine Huebner, in *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, offers an interesting case study of third-century Egyptian readers of Christian texts. In a private correspondence recorded on papyrus, P.Bas. 2.43, we are introduced to specific individuals hailing from the educated and wealthy elite of the Fayum.[75] They display an acquaintance with Christian literature through their use of *nomina sacra* in the letter, and are, therefore, certainly Christian (also considering the general content of the letter).[76] What strikes me about the case study is that this letter is evidence primarily of *individual* Christians or families, and only tacitly proof of existing Christian communities. Certainly, other evidence allows Huebner to infer the existence of "blossoming Christian communities in the Arsinoite villages in the 250s,"[77] but, to my mind, though written by Christians, this letter does not automatically necessitate a homogeneous Christian community.

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[69] Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96–104.

[70] Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 78.

[71] Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 81.

[72] Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 105.

[73] Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 110–111.

[74] Prominently Tommy Wasserman, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex," *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 1 (2005): 137–154, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688505000081, and Tobias Nicklas and Tommy Wasserman, "Theologische Linien im *Codex Bodmer Miscellani?*," in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World*, eds. Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, TENTS *2* (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 161–188.

[75] Sabine R. Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 18–28.

[76] Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, 21.

[77] Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, 27.

For, we should ask, with Walsh, as she lays out the foundation for her historical approach, "What is the simplest solution given the evidence we have at our disposal? This approach includes consciously limiting ourselves to analysis and comparison using what is patently in front of us without aspirational appeals to imagined communities, diversity, social formations, and processes."[78] Relating specifically to the Bodmer Papyri, Jean-Luc Fournet warns of the risks associated with community postulations,

> Le terme même de communauté n'est-il pas abusif en sous-entendant un profil homogène pour l'ensemble de ses utilisateurs? De plus, nous avons vu que cette bibliothèque s'est constituée sur trois siècles et qu'elle était donc susceptible d'être l'agrégat de plusieurs fonds d'origines diverses qui ne reflètent pas nécessairement l'état d'esprit de l'ensemble des usagers à la fin de son histoire. Enfin, elle peut avoir donné lieu à plusieurs activités, qui ne sont pas exclusives l'une de l'autre: création, lecture édifiante et instruction scolaire. Autrement dit, l'hypothèse d'une bibliothèque d'école n'est pas incompatible avec un milieu religieux. En l'absence d'une étude globale de la 'Bibliothèque Bodmer' sous tous ses aspects, il me paraît impossible d'être affirmatif dans un sens ou dans l'autre.[79]

Finally, Stowers raises a concern that the normative appeal to Christian communities lends itself to an oversimplification of the social contexts of the ancient world.[80] In Strickland's paper, we see this oversimplification as it relates to other Christian theologies. He suggests that, among other characteristics, the Christological orientation of the BMC, "probably would have made this an attractive collection of texts for proto-orthodox Coptic Christians living just a short distance from an affluent, heretical gnostic group."[81] Such a dichotomous portrayal – orthodox, pure Christianity versus Christianity, heretical and corrupted – is problematic since it does not fully account for the material evidence; rather, it retrojects predetermined anachronistic "social and literary contexts" onto ancient peoples. This, unfortunately, is a consequence of early Christian manuscript mystique, which, I would suggest, is in turn inspired by the recourse to homogeneous Christian communities for whom theological literature was first tailored.

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[78] Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 15.

[79] Fournet, "Anatomie d'une bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive," 17. See also his footnote 49 where he quotes Roger Bagnall, "A text, or even a whole library of texts, does not make a sect or a community." Also note Pasquale Orsini, who points out that the variegated styles of script across the Bodmer Papyri reflect "a *post hoc* assemblage of pieces from different periods … ," Orsini, *Studies on Greek and Coptic Majuscule Scripts and Books*, 33.

[80] Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 246–247, 249. Here, I am combining the third and fifth critiques.

[81] Strickland, "The Curious Case of 𝔓72," 787. However, such reductionistic thinking is also evident in Christian portrayals of Greeks and Romans in the early centuries; the implicit view is that they were up to their eyeballs in evil and debauchery, but the Christian message was so holy and pure that the unholy "pagans" were drawn to its incommensurable goodness, accepting it unequivocally. See Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 246.

In the concluding paragraph of his study, Strickland believes that "much can be learned from an ancient papyrus manuscript when it is placed within its social and literary contexts."[82] Strickland obviously feels that he has done just that; however, I would argue that he has inadvertently removed these ECMs from such contexts. How? Perhaps due to an unwitting theological devotion to Christianity's myth of origins; the idea that there is an uncorrupted and unbroken Christian thread that stretches back in time, all the way to Jesus, to a single genesis moment – as it has been called, the "Big Bang" of Christian origins.[83] Christianity's mythology, largely developed by the book of Acts, tells of widespread gospel proclamation by the followers of Jesus after his death, mass acceptance of their "Good News," and a rapid formation of unified, coherent believing communities who engaged with Christian writings.[84] This mythology has influenced scholarship of first- and second-century Christianity, but it apparently also inspires uncritical assumptions about homogeneous Christian communities in the third and fourth centuries.[85]

It is requisite to briefly address one final issue, which is related to the reductionistic "Christian" versus "heretic" or "Christian" versus "pagan" portrayals. To be sure, it is in the interests of preserving Christianity's myth of origins to reinforce such dichotomies – the bastions of truth locked in a cosmic battle for the ages against the agents of evil. Sadly, this is a historical construction (or should we say, fiction?), and an unfortunate one that obscures our view of the socio-religious context of Christianity in the ancient Mediterranean world. It is widely known that Christianity in the early centuries is best not described as one but, rather, multiple "Christianities." As Jeffery Siker notes, "Christianity in the second and third centuries was a time of both significant fluidity and consolidation of Christian identities at the same time… all shaping and contributing in dynamic ways to the complex character of the Christianities within Christianity of this era."[86] Christian beliefs, expressions, textual practices, social identity, etc. in the ancient Mediterranean were remarkably fluid.[87] David Frankfurter,

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[82] Strickland, "The Curious Case of 𝔓72," 791.

[83] Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 8. See also van den Heever, "Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions," 119.

[84] See Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 20–49 for a larger discussion. See also Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community'," 243–245.

[85] According to Walsh, the roots of this automatic recourse to religious communities traces back to impact of German Romanticism on New Testament academia namely, that authors of texts are "synecdochical both of a unifying, inspirational *Geist* [referring to the Holy Spirit] and of the community in which (usually) the author is writing" (italics original; square brackets mine), Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 53.

[86] See Jeffery Siker, "The Second and Third Centuries," in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., ed. Philip F. Esler (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 197–198. See pages 212–216 for a broad strokes overview of some of the diversity and complexity in the second and third centuries.

[87] Regarding social identity and textual practices, see Nycholas L. D. Oliveira and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "Codex and Contest: What an Early Christian Manuscript Reveals about Social Identity Formation Amid Persecution and Competing Christianities," *Religions* 15, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010044. Here we considered the BMC in the context of the larger Bodmer collection and attempted to account for the complex mixture of Christian and classical Greek literature. We concluded that, depending on certain social factors, people of the ancient Mediterranean could oscillate in their social identity representations.

in his book *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, compellingly depicts the complex process by which Egypt was Christianised in the late Antique period (fourth to seventh century). Rather than a simplistic framework of the virtuous Christian religion ultimately displacing the morally bankrupt Egyptian and Graeco-Roman religions, this Christianisation proceeds along syncretistic lines. Frankfurter writes, "'Christianity' describes not a state of cultural or religious accomplishment or 'identity' but an ongoing process of negotiation – of syncretism."[88] By "syncretism," he means the creative and constantly changing confluence of religious ideas in various social worlds (domestic, shrine, workshop, etc.) across Egypt.[89] Simply, Christianity in Egypt (and the wider Mediterranean)[90] was not a stable identity or framework of beliefs; rather, across overlapping social sites,[91] it was negotiated within a milieu that was permeated by ancient Egyptian and Graeco-Roman cult ideas and practices.[92] It was perhaps only at the level of the Christian leadership that portrayals of stability and fixity were perpetuated; and in the modern scholar's study, this portrayal is often allowed and encouraged to persist.

This, I believe, is the case with Strickland's paper as it scythes away a set of manuscripts from the Bodmer Papyri in search of a homogeneous proto-orthodox Christian community engaged in a theological conflict with a gnostic community nearby. Material evidence from the ancient Mediterranean, these Bodmer manuscripts (and evidence offered by Frankfurter), resists such a reductionistic picture of a syncretising Christian Egypt.

6. Conclusion

This research essay has sought to dispel the mystique of early Christian manuscripts, using $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ as a case study. This study was by no means meant to be exhaustive; rather, by building on scholarship that challenges the notion of sui generis religion and the extraordinary authority ascribed to religion's objects, I have offered a resistance to the theological recourse to homogeneous Christian communities as the creators, users, and proliferators of ECMs. My focus was on particular copies of Christian literature, $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$, comprising what may well be the earliest extant copies of 1–2 Peter and Jude. Instead of being a testament to one Christian

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[88] Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 6.

[89] For a fuller sense of how he understands syncretism, see Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 16–17, 19. Each of the chapters in his book is devoted to one of the social sites, showing how individuals and communities negotiated their Christianity in their relevant social contexts.

[90] Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 31. He notes that much of the socio-religious phenomena he describes are consonant with the wider Mediterranean world.

[91] Frankfurter offers several examples in his book, but specifically, see Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 36–37.

[92] van den Heever notes that because the "old religions" were "woven into the cultural fabric of inhabitants of the Mediterranean world", they were able to persist; in fact, Christianity was the means by which "the old gods and the old, traditional religious-symbolic discourses continued to function and exert their cultural pull." And vividly a few pages later, regarding the interpenetration of Christianity and Greco-Roman religions, "Christianity was the big sponge that absorbed all the others…" See van den Heever, "Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions," 130, 136. See also van den Heever, "Revisiting the Death/s of Religions," 156–158, for the wider socio-cultural shifts, taking place over time, that prepared the way for the Late Roman Empire to be Christianised.

community's theological views of Petrine authority, I believe, with others, that these texts are better understood as products of a private scribal network, made up of similarly minded, educated producers of literary culture. The complex composition of the Bodmer Papyri reflects the complex literary interests of readers and copyists, who were players in a complex process of Christianisation in Egypt. That $\mathfrak{P}^{72}$ could be understood as a monument to Petrine authority for a particular theologically, canonically oriented, unified, and coherent Christian community is too reductionistic and is highly unlikely given the evidence available to us.

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Appendix A

The Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex: A Hypothetical Reconstruction[93]

Text	Scribal hand[94]	Pagination
Section 1		
Nativity of Mary (P. Bodmer V)	A	1–49
3 Corinthians (X)	B	50–57
11th Ode of Solomon (XI)	B	57–62
Jude (VII)	B	62–68
Melito's homily on the passion (XIII)	A	1–63
Hymn fragment (XII)	A	64
Section 2		
Apology of Phileas (XX)	C	129–146?
Psalms 33:2–34:16 (IX)	D	147–151?
Section 3		
1–2 Peter (VIII)	B	1–36

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[93] Reproduced and adapted from my master's dissertation: Oliveira, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex," 46.

[94] See Orsini, *Studies on Greek and Coptic Majuscule Scripts and Books*, 37–43. Orsini sees five hands in the production of the codex, identifying Melito's homily and hymn fragment with a different hand.

Appendix B

The Bodmer Papyri[95]

P. Bodmer	Material	Content	Language
II ($\mathfrak{P}^{66}$)	Papyrus	John	Greek
III	Papyrus	John, Genesis 1:1–4:2	Bohairic Coptic
XXV, IV, XXVI	Papyrus	Menander (Samia, Dyskolos, The Shield)	Greek
V, X, XI, VII ($\mathfrak{P}^{72}$), XIII, XII, XX + IX,[96] VIII ($\mathfrak{P}^{72}$)	Papyrus	Nativity of Mary, 3 Corinthians, 11th Ode of Solomon, Jude, Melito's Homily on the Passion, liturgical hymn fragment, Apology of Phileas, 1–2 Peter	Greek
VI	Parchment	Proverbs	Proto-Sahidic Coptic
XIV, XV ($\mathfrak{P}^{75}$)	Papyrus	Luke, John	Greek
XVI	Parchment	Exodus 1:1–15:21	Sahidic Coptic
XVIII	Papyrus	Deuteronomy 1:1–10:7	Sahidic Coptic
XIX	Parchment	Matthew 14:28–28:20, Romans 1:1–2:3	Sahidic Coptic
XXI	Papyrus	Joshua	Sahidic Coptic

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[95] This list follows Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 217–218. Other information regarding language and written medium was drawn from Robinson, *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri*, 169–172. Nongbri's list would be classified as minimalist, while Robinson's would be a maximalist inventory. For other inventories, see also Laura Miguélez-Cavero, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200--600 AD* (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2008), 218–221; Fournet, "Anatomie d'une bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive," 21–23.

[96] Nongbri, *God's Library*, 218, writes concerning P. Bodmer XX and IX that these two texts were "formerly thought to be part of the Bodmer composite codex". Nongbri appeals to certain physical features of these manuscripts, such as page shape, lack of binding holes, unique pagination sequence, and different scribal hands (see "P.Bodmer XX+IX and the Bodmer Composite Codex," https://brentnongbri.com/2018/03/31/p-bodmer-xxix-and-the-bodmer-composite-codex/). Addressing this, Kobus Kok and I wrote, "In our estimation, Nongbri's observations are compelling; however, considering that the Apology and the Psalms share key theological motifs with other texts of the codex, we are inclined to believe that both were, *in some way*, part of the codex (not physically stitched but inserted, perhaps in haste, to be bound at a later stage?). How exactly will probably always remain a matter of conjecture" (italics original). See Oliveira and Kok, "Codex and Contest," 13, footnote 5. For this reason, contrary to Nongbri, I have chosen to list P. Bodmer XX and IX as still part of the BMC.

XXII, Mississippi Coptic Codex II	Parchment	Jeremiah 40:3–52:34, Lamentations, Epistle of Jeremy, Baruch 1:1–5:5	Sahidic Coptic
XXIII	Papyrus	Isaiah 47:1–66:24	Sahidic Coptic
XXIV	Papyrus	Psalms 17–118	Greek
XXVII, XLV, XLVI, XLVII	Papyrus	Thucydides, Suzanna, Daniel, Moral Exhortations	Greek
XXIX–XXXVIII	Papyrus	Shepherd of Hermas, Vision of Dorotheos, other poems	Greek
XL	Parchment	Song of Songs	Sahidic Coptic
XLI	Papyrus	The Acts of Paul	Subachmimic Coptic
Crosby-Schøyen codex MS 193	Papyrus	Melito's Homily on the Passion, 2 Maccabees 5:27–7:41, 1 Peter, Jonah, Easter homily or hymn	Sahidic Coptic
Barcelona-Montserrat codex[97]	Papyrus	1) Cicero (excerpts from Catilinarian orations), 2) Hymn to the Virgin Mary, 3) mythological drawing, 4) Anaphora and thanksgiving prayer, 5) hexameters on Alcestis, 6) story about Hadrian, 7) word list	Latin (1, 2, 5, 6), Greek (4, 7)
Chester Beatty AC. 1390	Papyrus	1) Mathematical exercises in Greek, 2) John 10:7–13:38	Greek (1), Subachmimic Coptic (2)
Chester Beatty AC. 1499	Papyrus	1) Greek grammar, 2) Greek-Latin lexicon on Paul's epistles (Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians)	

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[97] See "The Barcelona-Montserrat Greek-Latin Codex: Another "Bodmer" Codex with Mixed Contents," https://brentnongbri.com/2018/04/21/the-barcelona-montserrat-greek-latin-codex-another-bodmer-codex-with-mixed-contents/