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THE ORIGIN OF THE CHRISTIAN CODEX

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In *The Birth of the Codex*, published in 1983, my co-author, the late C. H. Roberts, and I put forward, in a very tentative manner, two alternative hypotheses to explain the extraordinary predilection of the early Christians for the codex form of book as opposed to the roll¹. Neither of these theories has found acceptance, and the purpose of the present article is to approach the problem from a different standpoint.

First, the facts, and here I shall restrict myself entirely to the Gospels, since it is in them, as will be shown, that the solution to the problem is to be sought. When Colin Roberts published his magisterial monograph *The Codex* in 1954 there were 22 known papyrus fragments of the Gospels, ranging in date from the 2nd century to the 6th or 7th. Every one of these was from a codex. Since then 20 more Gospel fragments have come to light, and again every one is from a codex.

This is an astonishing statistic, if we reflect that among non-Christian papyri the roll form predominated for centuries, and it was not until about 300 A. D. that the codex achieved parity of representation with the roll, and another two or three centuries passed before the roll disappeared altogether as a vehicle for literature.

Hitherto, all the advantages claimed for the codex as opposed to the roll have been matters of degree - the codex is *more* comprehensive, *more* convenient in use, *more* suited for ready reference, *more* economical (because both sides of the writing material were used), and so on. But in the case of the Gospels, representation of the codex is not a matter of degree - it is total, 100%, and the motive for adopting it must have been infinitely more powerful than anything hitherto considered. What we need to do, in fact, is to look for something which the codex could easily do, but which the roll could not, in any circumstances, do. And if the question is posed in this way, we do not have to look very far, for a codex could contain the texts of all four Gospels. No roll could do this.

To illustrate the last statement we can take the Chester Beatty papyrus codex of the four Gospels and Acts, written about the middle of the 3rd century. The pages are numbered, and we know that the Gospels occupied pp. 1-167, since Acts began on p. 168². Each page contained a column of writing about 16 cm. in breadth and, originally, about 19 cm. in height. If we imagine these columns set out on a roll, with space of, say, 2 cm. between them, the lengths of the individual Gospels will be as follows:

Matthew (49 pp.)	49 x 18 =	882 cm.
Mark (32 pp.)	32 x 18 =	576 cm.
Luke (48 pp.)	48 x 18 =	864 cm.
John (38 pp.)	<u>38 x 18 =</u>	<u>684 cm.</u>
	Total =	3006 cm.

¹ *The Birth of the Codex*, Section 10, pp. 54-61.

² For these and the following statistics see my article, *A Codicological Analysis of the Chester Beatty papyrus codex of Gospels and Acts* (P 45), to appear in the journal *Hermathena*.

It can be stated, without the possibility of contradiction, that a roll 3006 cm. = 30 m. in length would be completely unhandleable, as anyone sufficiently interested to make the experiment can find out for themselves. The maximum length of a roll is generally taken to be about 10 m. On the other hand, as the Beatty papyrus shows, a codex could contain not only all four Gospels, but Acts as well.

But, it will be asked, is there any evidence for a codex of all four Gospels as early as the 2nd century? This was discussed in *The Birth of the Codex*, pp. 65-66, in which the conclusion was reached that, although it would have been technically feasible, "a second-century codex of all four Gospels seems unlikely". Since then the position has altered somewhat. Of course the Chester Beatty codex itself must have ancestors reaching back towards, if not into, the second century. And I have published an article³ in which I argued that not only was Irenaeus, writing about 185 A. D., familiar with a four-Gospel codex, but that he used a source which had the four Gospels in the so-called "Western" order of Matthew, John, Luke, Mark, which implies that all four were in a codex. Furthermore, it seems to me quite possible that the Bodmer codex of Luke and John, P 75, is in fact the second half of a four-Gospel codex, since it consisted, when complete, of a single-quire codex of 72 leaves. A single-quire codex of double this size, 144 leaves (288 pages), would have been almost impossible to handle⁴, owing to the bulk of the central fold (100 leaves, or a little more, seems to have been about the maximum for a single-quire codex; the Chester Beatty codex IX, of Ezekiel, Daniel and Esther, which originally ran to 118 leaves, was probably about the limit). If then P 75 was originally a four-Gospel codex, it must have consisted of two single-quire codices sewn together, the first containing Matthew and Mark, the second Luke and John. P 75 was dated by its editors to between 175 and 225 A. D. and most later estimates place it early in the third century. This, of course, must also have had ancestors.

Nevertheless it is certainly true that most of the earliest Gospel fragments come, or appear to come, from single-Gospel codices. This might appear at first sight to invalidate the hypothesis put forward above, that the Christian use of the codex originated in the four-Gospel codex. I would suggest, however, that, paradoxical though it may seem, these single-Gospel codices are in fact evidence for the existence of the four-Gospel codex.

Let us imagine a second-century Christian confronted with a choice between a codex and a roll, each containing the same single Gospel. For an example of the codex we can take the earliest known Christian papyrus, the Rylands fragment of the Gospel of John, thought to have been written about 125. This must have originally been a codex of about 55 leaves (110 pages) measuring about 21 x 18 cm.⁵ and perhaps about 3 cm. thick if we allow for some form of binding. We can compare this with a roll of the same Gospel using the figures deduced from the Chester Beatty papyrus above, the length of papyrus for John being 6.84 metres.

³ "Irenaeus and the Four-Gospel Canon", *Novum Testamentum*, xxxiv. 2 (1992), pp. 194-199.

⁴ On the awkwardness of handling large single-quire codices cf. W. Schubart, *Das Buch*³ p. 114.

⁵ C. H. Roberts, *An unpublished fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library*, Manchester, 1935, p. 21, calculated that the original codex consisted of 66 leaves (132 pages) measuring 21 x 20 cm. My own estimates, given in the text, are somewhat smaller.

Schubart has pointed out that a roll 18 cm. in height and 6 m. in length, only slightly shorter, could be rolled into a cylinder 5-6 cm. in breadth, which could easily be held in the hand⁶. Faced with such a choice, the modern reader would, of course, immediately choose the codex, because that is the only form of book known to him. But to our second-century Christian the choice would not be so simple. Having been born into and lived in a society dominated by the roll, and having himself used rolls for many purposes, he might well have hesitated.

Of course it has often been claimed that the codex was cheaper than the roll, since both sides of the papyrus were utilised. However, the cost of writing would have remained the same, and this would have been the greater part of the expense. Some rough calculations which I have made⁷ indicate that the net saving by using the codex might be in the order of 25%, against which would have to be set the cost of sewing the leaves together and applying some form of cover or binding, so that the net savings, if any, would be minimal⁸. On the other hand we have the sheer simplicity of the roll, which was ready for use as soon as the ink had dried on the last column of writing.

Again, it is often claimed that reading a codex is easier than reading a roll. Here there is much misconception. It is said, for example, that in reading a roll the right hand unrolls the roll while the left hand rolls it up. Both statements are incorrect. What actually happens is that the right hand merely *supports* the bulk of the roll while the left pulls out a stretch for reading. When this had been read, the left hand does not roll it up - it rolls itself up, the left hand merely preventing it from rolling up too far⁹. The left hand then pulls out another stretch of papyrus, and the reading proceeds. With practice these operations would have become as automatic as turning the leaves of a codex.

There is a further important difference between reading a roll and reading a codex, which I have called the panoramic aspect¹⁰. In reading a roll the reader's eyes travel continuously over the text without interruption, like the smooth sequence of the frames of a cinematograph film, melting into each other, in contradistinction to the blinkered vision of the codex reader, to whom the text appears in a series of disjointed snapshots. I have quoted elsewhere the case of a technical article containing diagrams and explanatory text, in which the explanatory text often appeared overleaf from the diagram, so that one was left with the choice of looking at

⁶ It was a mistake (of mine) to say in *The Birth of the Codex*, p. 47, that a roll 18 cm. high and 6 m. long could be rolled into a cylinder 3-4 cm. in diameter. The correct figure should have been 5-6 cm. in diameter. It was also incorrect to say that such a roll could 'easily' have accommodated any of the Gospels. The lengths quoted in the text, derived from the Chester Beatty codex, are more realistic.

⁷ "The length of the standard papyrus roll and the cost-advantage of the codex" *ZPE*, 45, 1982, pp. 169-76.

⁸ The early single-Gospel codices are very lavish in their use of papyrus because of their format, viz. a large number of comparatively small pages, which means that much papyrus is wasted in the margins. The conclusion in *The Birth of the Codex*, p. 47, that "the argument from economy would seem to be negligible" is amply confirmed.

⁹ For the capacity of the papyrus to roll itself up cf. my note "Two notes on Papyrus. 1. Was re-rolling a papyrus roll an irksome and time-consuming task?" in *Scritti in onore di Orsolina Montevicchi*, 1981, pp. 373-6, and the following note.

¹⁰ "Roll versus Codex: a new approach?", *ZPE*, 84, 1990, pp. 297-8.

the diagrams without the explanatory text, or looking at the explanatory text without the diagrams. Had this been a roll, of course, there would have been no difficulty as both could be seen simultaneously.

After this long digression we can at last return to our 2nd century Christian, and we know that, faced with the choice, he decided upon the codex, not the roll, for his manuscript of John. In view of what has been said, it must have been a very powerful reason which induced him to abandon the practice of a lifetime and choose the codex. And I suggest that the reason must have been the fact that the four-Gospel codex was already in existence and had thus set the standard for manuscripts of individual Gospels.

We are now at the heart of the matter. We must assume, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, that the Gospels originally circulated in the usual way, on papyrus rolls. What can have induced the Church so suddenly, and totally, to abandon rolls, and substitute not just codices but a single codex containing all four Gospels?

It is my belief that the key to the whole situation was the publication of John (*circ.* 100 A. D.), which may well have caused a crisis in the Church. It certainly must have been received with very mixed feelings. Coming as it did with such apparently impeccable credentials, as the work of the "beloved disciple", it could neither be rejected nor ignored. But if it was accepted, a whole host of problems arose.

First of all, there was the sheer multiplicity of the Gospels. As Harnack reminded us nearly a century ago¹¹, we are so accustomed to the Four Gospels that it is difficult for us to appreciate what an extraordinary phenomenon this is - four different narratives, all purporting to record the life and teaching of Christ, but differing widely among themselves in approach and presentation. The danger was obvious. We know that later on the multiplicity of Gospels was a source of derision among unbelievers, but by 100 A. D. the alarm bells must already have been ringing. Questions must have been asked: when would the production of Gospels come to an end? Could anything be done to prevent the production of further Gospels? Should anything be done? What authority did the existing Gospels in fact possess? Moreover, since it was unlikely, in spite of the reference at the end of John to the "many other things" still said to be unrecorded, and the hyperbole of the final verse, that any authentic further evidence concerning the life and mission of Jesus could be recovered, the probability was that any new Gospels would be either romantic or sensational inventions designed to interest or amuse rather than instruct, or else intended to promote beliefs which the Church had rejected. Though the earliest evidence comes from a slightly later date, the threat of gnosticism must already have been looming on the horizon. Obviously the production of such writings could not be prevented. Was there then any way in which the existing four Gospels could be safeguarded from either addition or subtraction?

A variety of different courses was open to the Church, and must have been considered. Would it be possible to collect together all the authentic or seemingly authentic information concerning the life and mission of Jesus and on this basis construct one completely new and

¹¹ A. von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur bis Eusebius*: 2. Theil. *Die Chronologie* ..., 1897, p. 681.

authoritative Gospel? After all, this was what Luke had tried to do, and failed. It must, however, have very soon become evident that such a scheme was impracticable. Years of work would be needed, and the situation was one of urgency. What tests could be applied to determine authenticity? Furthermore, the popularity of the existing Gospels was such that it would be difficult for such a new work to replace them, and in any case the special message which each of the Evangelists had tried to convey would be lost.

Alternatively, would it be possible to exploit this very popularity of the existing Gospels by welding them into a continuous whole - the Diatessaron solution? It must have been obvious that such a proceeding was fraught with all sorts of difficulties, but that it was feasible is proved by the fact that it was actually achieved in the Diatessaron of Tatian. But although this proved popular in Syriac-speaking churches, it never gained acceptance in Greek- and Latin-speaking areas, where the existing four Gospels were so firmly entrenched that they could withstand the challenge of any competitor.

Since, then, any radical solution such as those considered above seemed to be impossible, the Church must have been forced to consider any physical means by which the four Gospels could be brought together and at the same time additions to their number could be discouraged. At this stage the proposal must have been made to include all four in a codex, the new form of book recently developed in Rome. Experiment would have shown that this was perfectly feasible, and although the earliest Roman codices seem to have been on parchment, it would be natural to replace this with the universal writing material, papyrus. Whether, in fact, the parchment codex or the papyrus codex was the earlier is still uncertain¹², but at any rate so far as Egypt was concerned the choice of papyrus would have been automatic.

How the decision was reached we have no means of knowing. Clearly there must have been correspondence between the major churches, and perhaps conferences. And once the Four-Gospel codex had been decided upon, every means must have been taken to spread the news throughout the Church. But merely publicising the decision would not have been enough. After all, if a codex could hold four Gospels, it could just as well hold three, or five. The choice of four had somehow to be justified, and we can trace in the pages of Irenaeus some of the ways in which this was done. Commentators usually appear to take the view that the arguments put forward by him are his own, but it seems to me much more likely that they reflect reasons adduced when the original decision was taken, since this was when they would have been most needed, whereas by the time of Irenaeus the battle had already been won. Some of the reasons can hardly be described as convincing - the four regions of the world, the four principal winds, the claim that since the Church was spread out over the whole world it needed four pillars for its support¹³, that 'since the creations of God are well-proportioned and harmonious, the same must apply to the form of the Gospel'¹⁴, and the fact that they were used shows how desperate was the need for support by any and every possible means. Something more definitely theological was clearly needed, and the parallel of the Four

¹² Cf. *The Birth of the Codex*, p. 29.

¹³ *Adv. haer.* III, 11, 8.

¹⁴ *Adv. haer.* III, 11, 9.

Covenants goes some way towards this, but what was wanted above all was an appeal to Scripture, *i. e.* the Old Testament. The centrepiece of Irenaeus's exposition is his famous identification of the Evangelists with the four 'Living Creatures' of the Apocalypse, but as I have shown¹⁵ this is based on an earlier comparison with the faces of the four Cherubim in the vision in the first chapter of Ezekiel, and this may well have been one of the principal arguments used when the decision to adopt the codex was made. It would in fact have been a much better illustration than the Apocalypse since in Ezekiel *each* of the Cherubim has four faces, which thus form an indissoluble unity¹⁶.

It might have been expected that when the decision was taken, the order in which the Gospels appeared in the codex would have also been decided, but this does not appear to have been the case. No doubt it was felt that so long as the codex contained all four, their order was unimportant, and any local preferences could be tolerated. Of course it was not to be expected that every Christian would possess, or even have access to, such a codex, but provided a sufficient number was available in major churches this should be adequate to ensure both the survival of the Four and the exclusion of others, and there could thus be no objection to the circulation of individual Gospels, which would naturally tend to be in the same codex format.

Such was, I believe, the solution reached. It was ingenious, daring, and totally successful, since no other Gospel gained entry into the Canon and none was lost. How great was the danger is shown by the vehemence with which Irenaeus (and perhaps also, as I have suggested, his source) defended the Four-Gospel Canon. Why no record of the decision has survived may perhaps be due to its instant and total success, so that memory of it would have soon faded. That Rome played a leading part is suggested by the decision to use the codex, a Roman invention, and involvement of Rome is perhaps confirmed by the inclusion of Mark, which at the time had seemed to be heading for oblivion: thanks to the codex, it survived - and bequeathed to us the Synoptic Problem.

Of course other Gospels still circulated freely, and continued to be read and quoted. But inevitably the selection of the Four and their physical unity in the Codex gave them, right from the start, an authority and prestige which no competitor could hope to rival. The Four-Gospel Canon and the Four-Gospel Codex are thus inseparable.

Finally, as has been emphasised throughout, much of what has been here proposed is inevitably based on conjecture and unless, for instance, fragments of a four-Gospel codex should come to light which could be securely dated to the earlier part of the 2nd century, is likely to remain so; and it is on this basis that the present article is laid before the reader¹⁷.

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¹⁵ Cf. note 3 above.

¹⁶ For the whole of this symbolism cf. H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, 1972, pp. 197-200.

¹⁷ While I alone am responsible for the views expressed in this article, I wish to record my gratitude to Professor Bruce Metzger and Professor Martin Hengel for encouraging me to put them forward in this form.