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The Material Gospel

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Editorial

The Material Gospel

The essays in this issue arise from a conference on "The Material Gospel" convened by Jeremiah Coogan and David Lincicum and held at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, on May 31, 2019. The gospels have always existed as material texts. In early Christianity, the gospels were implicated in a range of ritual, theological, economic, and political contexts. Gospel books were powerful objects. Augustine of Hippo complains that his congregants put gospel books under their pillows to cure headache (*Tract. Ev. Jo.* 7.12.1) and amulets attest that even short gospel excerpts were used for protective power.[1] The gospel in codex format often represented Christian identity, as gospel books were processed in liturgy and imposed on the shoulders of ordinands. The multi-gospel codex contributed to the emergence of a fourfold canonical gospel. In times of persecution, gospel books might even be subject to public execution in place of Christ himself.[2] The aim of the conference was to place these diverse but understudied phenomena in conversation with one another, and to consider the gospel as it becomes concretized in a text, but more than that, as it becomes concretized in particular material objects – discrete manuscripts, formed by particular technologies of book-making, and so subject to the vicissitudes that any small and delicate object charged with meaning might face in the world. The gospel under this mode of consideration might be equally subject to defacement as to veneration, to erasure and ritual destruction as to close textual scrutiny. In considering the gospel as material object, these essays therefore transgress long-standing disciplinary periodizations that have been reified through the force of repetition but are now beginning to crumble – between antiquity and late antiquity, between Christian origins

1 J. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory*, STAC 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); B.C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity*, LNTS 554 (London: T&T Clark, 2016); R.M. Calhoun, "The Gospel(-Amulet) as God's Power for Salvation," *EC* 10 (2019), 21–55.

2 J. Coogan, "Divine Truth, Presence, and Power: Christian Books in Roman North Africa," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 11 (2018), 375–395.

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and patristics or early Christian studies, between authorial beginnings and readerly reception.

In the first article of this collection, Chris Keith addresses "The Gospel Read, Sliced, and Burned: The Material Gospel and the Construction of Christian Identity." Keith argues that the gospel as a material object became part of early Christian identity, functioning as a material locus of memory and tradition. Through practices of public reading, the gospel book becomes a cult object. As a result, early Christians thought in decidedly literal (and yet metaphorical) terms about textual change, imagining Marcion of Sinope's editing as physical violence. The materiality and destruction of the Christian book were pivotal issues during the persecution under the emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century. In each of these contexts, Christian identity was demarcated by what one did with the material gospel.

The codex, a book format with pages and covers, quickly became a marker of Christian practices – to such an extent that scholars have suggested that the codex format became a marker of Christian identity, perhaps even chosen because of its visual distinctiveness. In "Galen's *De indolentia* and the Early Christian Codex," Clare Rothschild argues that the early Christian preference for a codex format was not only about visual distinctiveness or the perceived value of the texts, but also about the utility of the codex format. A recently rediscovered passage from second-century physician Galen (129–ca. 216 CE) offers a window into early use of the codex, revealing that Galen's choice of codex format was neither a bibliographic marker of genre nor an indication of value. Rather, Rothschild argues, the codex afforded durability, accessibility, expandability, and portability. These utilitarian considerations made it appropriate and convenient for Galen's collections of medical recipes. Similarly, codex format was practical for early Christian practices of study, liturgy, and travel in ways that exceeded the possibilities of the bookroll. Conversations about the early Christian adoption of the codex for gospels and other texts must, therefore, attend to the utility of the codex "to organize a swelling number of writings to which practitioners required easy access."

Jeremiah Coogan continues thinking with the codex in his article, "Gospel as Recipe Book: Nonlinear Reading and Practical Texts in Late Antiquity." We might assume that late ancient readers of the gospels approached them the way a modern reader might approach a novel: extensive reading, from beginning sequentially through to the end. But Coogan demonstrates that late ancient gospel codices are designed for nonlinear access by means of systems of segmentation and reference, most clearly

seen in the Eusebian apparatus. The realization that the gospels are presented with nonlinear access in mind opens a fruitful new set of *comparanda* in what Coogan deems "practical texts" – astronomical tables, architectural handbooks, collections of medical and magical recipes, and so forth. Reading the gospels alongside literature designed for practical use invites us to take seriously the types of reading encouraged by the paratextual features found in our earliest codices.

Interest in early Christian book technology has largely centered on the adoption and diffusion of the codex. But in her article, "Resisting the Codex: The Christian Use of the Roll in Late Antiquity," Sofía Torallas Tovar considers the neglected persistence of the roll for Christian communication in late antiquity. Demonstrating the spread of book-technological practices across languages and genres, she places the study of the roll in a broader frame than those who have searched for parallel formats within a single language, writing material, or genre. The roll – as *volumen* or *rotulus* – did not simply disappear in the face of the codex's rise, but found wide diffusion for texts as varied as magical recipes, communications with imperial authorities, and, especially, festal letters.

Given that the gospels become sacred texts, highly prized by their communities, it might be surprising to find them erased for reuse. In her article, "Erasing the Gospels: Sinaiticus Syriacus and Patterns among Syriac Gospel Palimpsests," Angela Zautcke investigates this phenomenon, taking as her starting point a Syriac palimpsest whose undertext contains one of only three extant copies of the Old Syriac translation of the gospels. Some have suggested that the Old Syriac might have been deliberately erased in favor of the Peshitta. Zautcke, however, counters this assertion by conducting an innovative assessment of the Syriac palimpsests in the Sinai collection, demonstrating that Sinaiticus Syriacus conforms to normal patterns of use, erasure, and reuse – undergoing the usual "lifecycle" of a gospel text.

In the final article, Matthew Larsen describes "The Real-and-Imagined Biography of a Gospel Manuscript." Larsen narrates the biography of the Latin gospel manuscript known as Codex Bobiensis (Turin National University Library, G. VII. 15), from its production in Roman North Africa to its current dismembered state in Turin. This manuscript offers an unusual – and often ignored – gospel text and an even more unusual hybrid form that combines Mark and Matthew. It takes its common name from Bobbio Abbey, where it was preserved in part because of a remembered association with the Irish missionary Columbanus (ca. 540–615 CE). The story of this object ends (for now) in Turin, where the manuscript exists as a collection

of dismounted folios. Larsen's biography of this manuscript demonstrates the value of moving beyond the "original text" to examine the continued and changing materiality of gospel texts as objects.

The conference that gave rise to these articles was made possible in part by generous support from the Medieval Institute, from the Department of Theology, and from the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, College of Arts and Letters, at the University of Notre Dame. It is also the convenor's pleasure to record their thanks to the colleagues who participated as respondents during the oral delivery of these papers: Nathan Eubank, Robin Jensen, and Paul Wheatley.

In the "New Discoveries" section, Annette Weissenrieder and André Luiz Visinoni take a different approach to a material gospel – the roughly early-fifth-century Fragmenta Curiensia, which preserve two passages of Luke's Gospel in Latin. The authors' close reading yields a series of new philological and theological insights into the text, and adds substantively to our understanding of the relationship between early Latin Bible translations. They argue that the Fragmenta preserve, in part, the only surviving copy of one of the lost folios of Codex Vercellensis, making them the oldest Old Latin text for this passage of Luke (11:11b–25). Where both texts survive, the Fragmenta evidently follow the text of Codex Vercellensis, but periodically the (or a) scribe revises the text to align it more closely to the Greek original or to one of several other known Latin versions. The scribe's linguistic choices, moreover, suggest that the evolution of Latin at the time it was written was more complex than traditional categories such as "Bible Latin" and "Vulgar Latin" allow.

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