Scott D. Charlesworth


Charlesworth has whetted our appetites for this major study in several earlier publications. (Most are acknowledged on pp. xiii-xiv.) The current book was published in 2017 although the title page shows 2016. Only 300 copies, all numbered, were printed.

The bibliographies imply that the book has had a long gestation. References to a Greek New Testament are to NA26 and NA27 or to UBS4. These imply that the original research goes back to times prior to NA28 (published in 2012) and UBS5 (of 2014). References to Ehrman and Holmes’ *The Text of the New Testament in Textual Research* are to its first edition (1995); a fully revised and expanded second edition emerged in 2013. Likewise, the ECM Catholics refers only to the fascicules that were published between 1997 and 2005; the second edition of 2013 is ignored (see p. 284). The third edition of my *Bibliography of Greek New Testament Manuscripts* of 2015 is not included, only the second edition (2000) and its three supplements are given on p. 290 (where the initial letters of all the nouns are capitalized, contrary to Charlesworth’s practice elsewhere.) Surprisingly, in a caption to Plate vii Charlesworth is ahead of events in that he refers to an exhibit in the Museum of the Bible in Washington DC; this gallery is to be opened only in the autumn of 2017.

The main purpose of Charlesworth’s study is to counter the commonly repeated misapprehension that copies of gospels written in the earliest four Christian centuries did not differentiate between writings that were to become authoritative, canonical scripture and those destined to be rejected from the New Testament and subsequently to be labelled ‘apocryphal’. Throughout his book Charlesworth prefixes the word gospel(s) with a superscript c (= canonical) or n (= non-canonical) to indicate their ultimate destinies. ‘Early’ in his title means witnesses dated from c.30 to c.300 AD (‘Earliest’ then means papyri from 30 to 150, e.g. P52, P77 with P103, P90, P104.) In chapter 2 he introduces and analyses the early papyri; in chapter 4 works such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary and Papyrus Egerton 2 are introduced. (Smaller fragments, many only allegedly of otherwise lost apocrypha, are summarily introduced on pp. 140-151.) In both chapters he concentrates on the codicology of the papyri, their original size, the use of contractions for *nomina sacra* and whether they come from a roll or codex. He further discusses their handwriting, the use or otherwise of lectionary aids (such as paragraphing and line lengths), with a view to deciding whether their use was public reading or
private use. In the event, his conclusions state that it is only the papyri containing what became the four-fold canonical gospels that were carefully controlled with a high proportion destined for public reading. In this he confirms Irenaeus’ well-known arguments for four gospels—and only four. (Irenaeus’ conclusions clearly emphasise that this number is intended to be not only inclusive but exclusive, rejecting other later and competing gospels.) The manuscripts used by Charlesworth, some of which date from the second- and early third-century clearly belong to Irenaeus’ time. Certainly as far the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were concerned their status as canonical writings was emerging by 180 AD or so.

In chapter 1 Charlesworth gives us general background details on early witnesses; chapter 2 examines early Christian codicological conventions separating texts written for private use from those designed for public, i.e. liturgical, reading. (Within this chapter the intriguing comparison between text divisions found in NA27 and those in P64=P67 + P4 recall Christian-Bernard Amphoux’ pleas over many years and in many places that such studies should be extended to the great majuscules); chapter 3 studies a relatively well-researched topic, the use of the nomina sacra in early canonical gospels; chapter 4 discusses the private use of non-canonical manuscripts; chapters 5 and 6 deal with text-critical issues—5 is entitled “Textual Fluidity in Early cGospel mss” and 6 has the, significantly, slightly different title: “Textual Originality in Early nGospels”. Chapter 6 includes useful analyses of P.Eg. 2 and other reconstructed ‘apocryphal’ writings; it is good to have Charlesworth’s text of these witnesses to hand. The final chapter considers the important issue of the historiography of early Christianity. There are three excursus, the third being an interesting analysis of ancient literacy in Egypt. Throughout, Charlesworth provides helpful signposting, sub-titles and useful tables, all of which betray his great staying power; we congratulate him on his careful research and Sitzfleisch. A Bibliography is followed by eleven indexes and the volume ends with 32 pages of photographic plates of canonical and non-canonical papyri, ending with photographs of P64, P67 and P4, all of which Charlesworth has dealt with extensively elsewhere (a fact that makes him unwilling to repeat himself, as stated on p. 37 note 47).

Charlesworth is also concerned to re-examine judgements made by the Alands, Min, Wasserman and others on whether a text was ‘free’ (i.e. carelessly copied), ‘normal’, or ‘strict’ (i.e. carefully controlled, just as later Byzantine witnesses seem to have been).

His wise message is to demonstrate that manuscripts must never be studied merely as carriers of readings or ‘tradents’ (to repeat the recently-coined jargon), but must be studied holistically and seen as artefacts. This codicological