

Book Review

Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practice. By Alan Mugridge.
WUNT 362. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016. 558 pp., \$239.00. cloth

Blame the scribes! That has been a refrain for quite some time in the field of New Testament Textual Criticism. Now, Alan Mugridge, Senior Lecturer of New Testament at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, attempts to find out what we can actually know about those who penned the manuscripts.

The purpose of the volume, according to Mugridge, “is to examine the extant Christian papyri, along with a number of allied papyri as a control set, in order to ascertain what kinds of writers actually copied or wrote them” (2). By “Christian papyri,” he means the ones bearing Christian texts: Old Testament, New Testament, apocryphal, patristic, hagiographic, liturgical, gnostic, Manichaean, and unidentified texts. By “allied papyri,” he means those addressing a deity or deities for help in life: amulets, magical texts, Jewish texts (OT and other), and school texts.

To non-experts, there is still much to consider in this work beyond the papyrological particulars provided in the catalogue of 548 papyri that dominate the book (155–410). Mugridge eagerly contests widely held beliefs about the copying of early Christian texts—the idea that early Christians had their texts copied “in house” (i.e., by themselves without much scribal expertise)—and he refutes the persistent suspicion that the copyists of some NT papyri deliberately changed the text to comply with their theology because they were Christians. The reality, he argues, is that the copyists of early Christian texts were *not* typically Christians. Rather, the majority of them were trained, professional scribes, who probably had a variety of religious convictions.

These arguments will no doubt elicit howls of protest from other specialists, but touches upon one of the book’s greatest strengths. Mugridge offers a remarkably rich discussion of scribal features and of how the copying of Christian texts took shape over time (1–154). He shows how complex of a topic it really is, and presents his case through a closer reading of more manuscripts than most can claim. He hopes that readers will come away with

a better understanding about how Christians had their texts copied during the second to fourth centuries AD, as well as the kinds of people who would have had the ability and opportunity to copy them.

In this work, we also learn that “there are so few examples of Christian or Jewish papyri [at least up to the end of the fourth century AD] with regular and clear spacing between words” (71). While that news is not especially fresh, it certainly helps actualize the importance of what a growing number of scholars are saying about the alleged difficulties of reading a manuscript written in *scriptio continua* (i.e., without spacing between words): it was the norm of the day and we should essentially drop the line of argument that says a “professional” reader was required. In fact, the author’s treatment of various “reading aids” is necessarily brief but useful for that very reason: readers’ aids “cannot serve to confirm or indicate the professionalism of the copyist of the Christian papyri reviewed here, since writers on the spectrum from highly professional scribes down to the very unskilled writers made the same kind of intermittent and inconsistent use of them” (91).

Some major overstatements, however, detract from the volume’s overall effect. In attempting to counteract the dominant view that early Christian texts were reproduced by Christians, who were mostly nonprofessional scribes, Mugridge exaggerates the evidence. For instance, to say that professional writers required writing implements that “must have been unusual for anyone to possess, except trained scribes and members of the elite” is to overreach (13). It is also bold to give so much credit to the *assumption* that over 80-90% of the population was illiterate because some scholars have argued that a certain type of formal schooling “was available only to a few” (12), and therefore risky to base an entire book on this premise. Valid objections can be made to refute this latter claim, and ample evidence exists contrary to the former one. For example, see several counter arguments and evidence in my article on ancient literacy (*TrinJ* 36.4 [2015]: 161–89) and forthcoming book on early Christian reading practices (*Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus* [Minneapolis, MN; Fortress Press, 2017]).

He then goes on to state that “there is no reason to use the word [‘scriptorium’] as a setting in which the copying of texts involved more than a single scribe] for this early period in general, [and] it would be better not to use it at all when discussing Christian papyri from the first four centuries” (16). This assertion, however, remains unsubstantiated, especially because there is

evidence that can be used to suggest that scriptoria were well-established by the end of the second century AD. The utilization of *nomina sacra*, preference for the codex form, and a host of other common characteristics among early Christian texts, such as uniformity in manuscript size, range of handwriting, and particular readers' aids, are all indications of organization and standardization of practice that cannot so easily be swept aside in just a few sentences or paragraphs. Some type of controlled production (i.e., quality control) for the public usage of the following second-century Christian manuscripts, for example, seems probable: 155, 171, 172, and 201 (according to Murgridge's catalogue numbering system; or more popularly known among readers of this journal as P64/67, P104, P77, and P90 respectively).

He also seems to assume throughout the work that there exists a directly proportional relationship between scribal professionalism and textual purity. Yet scribal hands do not necessarily dictate scribal accuracy (among studies not noted in this volume, see Colin Roberts, *The Antinoopolis Papyri* [1950]; Susan Stephens, *Yale Papyri in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library II* [1985]). Granted, he does note that trained scribes could and did make errors (e.g., see 142). But he still concludes with such strong language to the contrary: "By drawing on the services of trained copyists to have their texts reproduced, the Christians were *guaranteed* prompt and *accurate* work ... the *accuracy embedded in the copying* of texts served as *the* basis for generally *very consistent* texts being dispersed ... To have *ensured accurate copying* from the start, rather than leaving that task to amateur 'insiders,' laid a foundation for *thoroughgoing reliability*" (153; most italics added).

Last but not least, because there are so few surviving papyri with signs that a professional scribe had done the copying (i.e., "stichometric counts") in the archaeological record, much of the research Murgridge discusses in this regard is speculative, some extremely so. That is not necessarily a bar to his project; the speculations are thought-provoking, and the process by which scholars try to piece together the past from many different perspectives is an interesting story in its own right. In other words, the lack of sharp conclusions comes with the territory.

In sum, I highly recommend this book and believe that every theological library should own a copy. Murgridge's reliable, wealth-of-details approach demands a reflective read. While I do not think he succeeds in proving that the majority of early Christian texts were copied by non-Christians, he does

effectively show how most copyists of early Christian texts had skill and an interest in doing their work well and accurately. Or to put this yet another way, whereas Mugridge argues that “there is no firm evidence that the copyists were generally Christians” (2), I would contend with equal conviction that there is no firm evidence that the copyists were *not* generally Christians.

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