
Reviewed by
Peter R. Rodgers

The appearance of another study on the canon of the New Testament is no surprise. A study that argues that the New Testament reached its final form as a canonical edition by the middle of the second century is. Such is David Trobisch’s *The First Edition of the New Testament*. Trobisch argues that “the New Testament, in the form that received canonical status, is not the result of a lengthy and complicated collecting process that lasted several centuries. The History of the New Testament is the history of an edition, a book that has been published and edited by a specific group of editors, at a specific place, and at a specific time.” (p. 6) Here is a bold proposal indeed. Late twentieth-century scholar study of the New Testament canon has been dominated by the view of Hans von Campenhausen that the formation of the Christian Bible was a centuries-long process of development. No new proposal in this area of New Testament study can expect a wide readership without introducing either new evidence or fresh perspective. The value of Trobisch’s study is that he offers both.

The new evidence is drawn from a number of the New Testament papyri not available to earlier scholars like Westcott, Loisy, Zahn and Harnack. These documents, dating from the second and third centuries, offer indications of editorial activity that can move the discussion beyond the stalemate reached in the assessment of indirect evidence, i.e. New Testament quotations and allusions in early Christian and non-Christian writers.

According to Trobisch, evidence for the *canonical edition* of the New Testament can be found in the editorial indicators of the earliest manuscripts. “The arrangement and number of New Testament writings in the oldest extant manuscripts of the Christian Bible provide the most important evidence for describing the history of the canon.” (p. 21). Thus *Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Alexandrinus*, our oldest extant witnesses of the complete edition, share the same number and arrangement of New Testament writings. The five exceptions from the first seven centuries (P46, D Paul, D Gospels, W and P72) indicate deliberate redactional re-arrangement of the same material (for example the “western” order of the Gospels: Matthew, John, Luke, Mark in D and W) and have left no trace in the later manuscript tradition. This evidence combined with other features (*nomina sacra*, the codex form, the formulation of titles and the use of the term *New Testament* “from the very beginning” (p. 44) all indicate careful final redaction so idiosyncratic that it must be the work of a single editorial unit.

Trobisch brings new perspective to the discussion in his section on the editorial concept. He argues that at least four writings—Acts, 2 Peter, 2 Timothy and John—contain valuable clues that can help us to locate the date and concerns, and possibly even the editors and first publishers, of the canonical edition. The two halves of the Acts of the Apostles (1-12, 13-28) together with the report in Acts of the Jerusalem council serve to minimize the conflict between Peter and Paul, thus “counteracting an impression the readers might have gathered from reading Galatians.” (p. 83). The mention of Mark and Luke together in 2 Tim. 4:11 and Peter’s commendation of the letters of Paul (2 Pet. 3:15b-16) further serve this editorial purpose. John 21 is presented not only as an editorial note to the reader of the Gospel, but possibly of the four Gospels collection or even the first edition of the New Testament. Especially John 21:25, the last sentence of the four-Gospel book viewed from a “reader-oriented interpretation of the New
Testament,” gives important indications of an editorial note (e.g. The change from “we know” to “I suppose,” the mention of multiple books as opposed to one book in John 20:30). Other books of the New Testament such as 1 Thessalonians and Revelation may also offer cross-referencing that serves the purpose of the canonical edition.

Trobisch does not stop with description. He seeks to locate the date and the circumstances that would best account for the publication of the canonical edition. He believes that “we may look for a situation in the middle of the second century when the church in Asia Minor communicated with Rome” (p. 105), and he identifies the Marcionite movement and the Easter Controversy as two candidates for such a situation, displaying concerns of importance to the implied readership of the Canonical Edition. He stops short of actually identifying the editor or editors. This will have to await further studies from Trobisch, unless his own readers’ response is such as to send them on a treasure hunt through the second century church.

Reaction and criticism of Trobisch’s pioneering work will come from a variety of different sectors of New Testament studies and related fields. Textual critics will ask whether in excluding so many early manuscripts from consideration (p. 29) he has not eliminated some valuable evidence from the discussion. They may also wonder why more was not made of the two distinctive versions of Acts. I missed a reference to the important study by Will Strange, The Problem of the Text of Acts (Cambridge, 1992), which posits editorial skill on the part of Luke, who incorporated marginal notes into his second edition of Acts. If “Luke published Acts while Paul was still alive,” (p. 138 note 61) did he publish the B text or the D text? Was the second edition of Acts published after the death of the apostle? Others may find the lack of any manuscript evidence for a Gospel of John without chapter 21 problematic for Trobisch’s view. They may also question the absence of a note concerning the textual crux at Luke 24:51-53 (p. 50) and the reference to P50 as a talisman or charm. It was probably an evangelists’ manual. The suggestion that modern textual critics should strive to produce an edition of the Greek New Testament that closely represents the editio princeps of the canonical edition adds to the already heated debate about the proper goal of New Testament textual criticism.

Form critics may ask whether the exegetical, rhetorical and liturgical patterns that were evident in the shaping of New Testament material remained a formative factor in the second century, even after the time when Papias witnessed to the coexistence of both oral and written tradition. Did these patterns continue to shape the process of collection and canonization as well as transmission? In particular, what part did the liturgical use of the New Testament documents play in their reaching the canonical shape during the century?

Those involved in the work of biblical hermeneutics will note that Trobisch “attempts to understand the text from the reader’s perspective.” (p. 80). Some may raise the concern that an emphasis on the implied readers’ profile needs to be balanced by a renewed concentration on identifying the author, redactor and editor. Trobisch’s refusal to treat the question of authorship “within the framework of authenticity, pseudonymity and forgery” (p. 147 note 8) will be frustrating to those who view these questions as integral to any discussion of canon.

Church historians, aware of the complexity and variety of issues facing second century Christians, will want to ask whether other factors beside the Marcionite challenge and the Easter Controversy may have called forth the canonical edition. The challenge of Valentinus, together with the rival “apocryphal” Gospels and Acts, and the church’s response to the Judaism from which it was emerging may equally have been factors that contributed to the publication of the edition. Some may want to guess who Trobisch believes was the editor. If they see the canonical edition being produced later in the century, then two possible candidates for its driving force
would be Dionysius of Corinth or Irenaeus of Lyons. If the edition was earlier, as Trobisch believes, the obvious candidate is a person Trobisch does not cite in his index of Ancient Sources, Polycarp of Smyrna.

Whatever the criticisms and guesswork this book generates, including disappointment that there is no index of scripture citations or modern scholars, it promises to be a significant influence in the future study of the formation of the canon.