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THE SCRIPTURAL UNIVERSE  
OF LATE ANTIQUITY

EDITED BY EMMANOUELA GRYPEOU

WITH A POSTFACE BY GUY G. STROUMSA

SINDÉRESIS  
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UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA  
DE SALAMANCA



Sindéresis<sup>editorial</sup>

## The Scriptural Universe of Late Antiquity

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# Preface

Emmanouela Grypeou  
Stockholm

This volume started as a workshop, which took place at the University of Stockholm in April 2017. The starting point of this workshop was Guy Stroumsa's book, "The Scriptural Universe of Early Christianity" published in 2016.

In this seminal work, Stroumsa argued that the end of blood sacrifice inaugurated a new era in Late Antiquity, the era of the book. Stroumsa acutely observed the passage from scroll to codex mainly among Christians and the enormous impact that this passage had for the spread of Christianity, or, for the wide spread of religious texts and ideas more generally. The success-story of the codex influenced rates of literacy and the handling of texts both as literary works and as artefacts. Furthermore, as Stroumsa stressed, the emergence of a new book culture during Late Antiquity was instrumental for the shaping of new religious and communal identities.

The importance of the book as the heavenly book, as encountered in rabbinic perceptions of the Torah as the heavenly pre-existing Tora or of the Qur'an as the Book sent from Heaven stress the metaphysical perception of a sacred book in the long late antiquity. The book is present in the Jewish and Christian heavenly courts but then, still mostly, as a scroll, rather than a codex, as the vivid images of God or his angels opening or rather unrolling the book at the Day of Judgement instruct us. Finally, even the heavens are occasionally envisaged as a scroll of sorts. John in Revelation, and the Qur'an as well, speak of the heaven being rolled up like a scroll, at the end of days, when in a way, the book of human history and creation will be completed and return to its divine origin.

Imagining the heavens as a written text was, of course, only possible in the context of certain cultures of literacy. Stroumsa speaks of "textual communities" in the context of monasteries and the *beit midrashim*, communities of readers, scribes and commentators actively participating in productions, reproductions of the scriptural codex. A scribe would function as a literary authority, making broad eclectic use of the wide variety of books available. The sheer amount and

variety of books held in monastery libraries, bound in codices is just a testimony of the importance of the bookish interests of the Christian monks.

As Stroumsa stressed “a book – whether *codex* or *volumen* – is an invaluable good”. The book in its material form as an artefact becomes a sacred object, an object of special veneration, a status maybe already dictated by the awe of the hardly literate societies in front of the actual written word. And as Stroumsa argues the materiality of the books might have supported a surge in literacy rates. Still, even with the broad(er) availability of the codex, literacy in late antiquity remains a foremost privilege of the religious authorities and religious specialists.

The book, the volume in its physical existence supersedes its own contents and it becomes something more powerful and more eloquent as a whole. The books, as carriers of (holy) texts, were perceived as sacred and would even acquire magical qualities. These supernatural qualities were expressed and put into practice through a variety of divinatory methods, such as bibliomancy and later, the *sortes sanctorum*.

The concept of the “sacred book” in Late Antiquity expanded to include the understanding and manipulation of “sacred scripture” as “magical scripture” and “magical book”. The Holy Book involved various degrees of ideological, symbolic and material manipulation and manufacturing. Scripture was manipulated for magical purposes both in its material form as a portable codex and in its use of the text as magical formulae employed in the manufacturing of textual amulets.

The belief in the Bible codex as a miracle-working object with apotropaic and protective powers is widely documented in archaeological finds as well as in the literature of late antiquity Augustine records the popular practice of placing or binding the Gospel of John onto the bodies of people suffering from headaches, or other afflictions (*Comm. Job. 7.12*). Jerome refers to Christian “old wives” wearing small amulet rolls containing (parts of?) the Gospels (*parvula evangelia*) and compares such Christian gospel ‘phylacteries’ to the Jewish tefillin (*Comm. Matth. 4.6.*). A number of small-size codices are indeed preserved that may have been used for similar magical or amuletic purposes.

According to Stroumsa, the use of the codex as an affordable and practical book was favoured by the missionising mobile Christians, as it considerably enabled their missionary work around the empire. As such, the book was not primarily considered as instrumental in the context of a static cultic activity but became a tool of evangelisation and religious education. Thus, the Scripture in the handy form of a pocketbook could be easily brought along when traveling,

and we often encounter wandering monks with small gospel books in their possession.

The essays collected in this volume investigate several important and so far, partly little studied aspects of the complex book culture that evolved in Late Antiquity. They critically consider the importance of materiality, of cultural transmission and heritage, developments in reading and writing practices and in manuscript cultures, the development and innovation of literary genres and how these reflect the spirit of late antique culture, the availability and even disappearance of books in the scriptural universe of late antiquity.

The volume opens with a contribution by *Peter Jackson* on the “*The Coming of the Anywhere Book: Classical Prefigurations of “Book as Cult”*”. Jackson suggests that the activity of reading developed as a proxy for animal sacrifice in the absence of the temple. Jackson draws attention to the topos of the traveling Orpheotelestai that used books or scriptures in contiguity with the abstention from animal sacrifice. Examining early Greek evidence – the so-called *hierai bibloi* – and using the analytical topography by J.Z. Smith of three loci: here, there and anywhere, Jackson demonstrates the significant differences between ancient/classical and late antique forms of Mediterranean religion. Accordingly, he stresses the first two categories as religions of sanctification that maintain and repair the ordered world, whereas the religions of anywhere become the religions of salvation. The connection between religion and literacy can also be seen in the practice of divination, where the extispicy- sacrifice becomes a scholarly site of reading and speculation. According to Jackson, these developments related to sacrifice (and its absence or, abstention from), prepared the ground for the coming of the anywhere book.

*Justin Meggitt* in his article, “*Losing books in a “scriptural universe”: what happened to Papias?*” investigates the reasons and meaning of the losing of books in a ‘scriptural universe’. Specifically, Meggitt, looks at Papias’ Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord, a work of originally five volumes containing traditions about Jesus, composed or compiled by a proto-orthodox author, and probably published a few decades after the canonical gospels and which is only preserved in a handful of brief fragments. Meggitt gives a long list of examples of other lost books from antiquity and early Christianity and looks into the various factors that may have contributed to their loss, such as neglect, lack of interest, absence of sufficient if any copies, suppression, physical damage or destruction caused by time and animals. However, all evidence points to the simple fact that lack of active interest in maintaining a text may have led to its total disappearance. A

possible reason behind Papias' disappearance may have been that it was not considered important or interesting or intelligent enough to be preserved –or it was too long and massive a work. Another possible explanation could be Papias' belief in the millennial reign of Christ on earth and his literal reading of eschatological traditions, which later became unpopular among certain Christian circles. As Meggitt points out the losing of books can be traumatic but can also be illuminating about the complex dynamics of the emergent scriptural universe of late antiquity. Losing of books can also be significant about the perceived status of a text as not sacred but liminal and possibly also paradoxical.

Jørgen Podemann Sørensen in his contribution, '*Scripture to be enacted on a reader: The design of some Gnostic and Hermetic texts*', discusses the important new literary innovations that emerged in Hellenism and in late antiquity and how these reflect on contemporary religious movements. These new literary genres formed a synthesis of a suggestive imagery and ritual efficacy associated with practices in the mystery cults related to devotional reading. Sørensen analyses certain characteristic Nag Hammadi and hermetic texts and argues that these were composed in a way including novel-parts and hymnic elements so that their performative reading would directly lead to gnosis and salvation. Thus, these texts demonstrated a hybrid literary form which combined mythological revelations with performative hymnic elements. They were to be enacted on the reader and by the reader, whereby the book in view would stand for the whole world. The hybrid form of Gnostic and Hermetic literature discussed combined revelations of privileged teaching in mythological form with the performative element in the form of a hymn, a role to be taken by the adept reader. As a revelation to the elect, the reader, in the process of reading, would go through the successive stages of *unio hymnica*, and eventually attain gnosis and redemption.

Einar Thomassen in his article, '*Was there a distinct Gnostic Book Culture?*' addresses the concept of the book in the so-called Gnostic texts of Nag Hammadi, in which, in texts, like the *Gospel of Truth*, apply an extraordinary rich symbolism to the theme of "book". The idea of a religion of book involves a discourse about "the gospel" as a revelatory agent of salvation. The *Gospel of Truth* is performed as speech but also seems to be conceived as a person, accomplishing a work of redemption for humanity. Thomassen using a quite wide definition of "book" in his discussion of the use and intentionality of the "book" or "gospel" in the Gnostic milieu, understands Gnosticism as a proper religion of the book. Perhaps similar to other sectarian milieus in the wider Greco-Roman world and especially the Orphic literature, Gnostics practiced a religion of the book – as communities of readers using books for instruction but

also for formation of communal and personal identities since books were also conceived as vehicles of salvation. Accordingly, Thomassen looks at Orphism and Gnosticism for religions of the book, rather than Christianity. Against this background, Thomassen argues that it was not immediately obvious that Christianity was to become “a religion of the book”, since the centre of Christianity is the belief in the resurrection of a divine person, Jesus Christ, and not a book as such.

*Dan Nässelqvist's* contribution, ‘*Reader's Aids for Whom? The Use of Lectional Signs in Early Christian Manuscripts*’ focuses on early Christian manuscripts and specifically to the variety of lectional signs, which were used as “reader’s aids” for communal or public reading, and which occur in a greater degree in early Christian manuscripts. As Nässelqvist shows some lectional signs guide pronunciation rather than display text division. Regarding their frequency, Nässelqvist challenges the common hypothesis that these signs are primarily found in manuscripts intended for communal readings, but rarely, in manuscripts produced for private use, such as miniature codices. According to Nässelqvist the palaeographic evidence suggests otherwise. Previous scholarship has argued that the particularities of early Christian manuscripts reflected a specific Christian reading culture. Specifically, the codex format indicated a deliberate move away from the book roll and the dominant reading culture. However, lectional signs can be understood as important characteristics of an emerging Christian visual culture, as for example, in the use of staurograms and the nomina sacra. The evidence further suggests that lectional signs could have also been used as aids for the private reader as well as for weak readers, in order to assist and guide to interpretation of the texts, especially since private reading of biblical texts was not an uncommon practice at the time.

*Paul Linjamaa's* contribution, ‘*Nag Hammadi Codex I as a Protective Artifact and an Accidental Multi-Quire Codex*’, focuses on the study of the codicology and scribal features of the Nag Hammadi Codex I, a multi quire codex, which is one of the oldest ones preserved, comprising of 36 sheets of paper from 4 different rolls. In a careful description of the binding technique, Linjamaa assumes that the binding is perhaps the result of an initial accident in the bookbinding. Significantly, the endings and beginnings of the codex are decorated with crosses of different kinds, which must have been intended as protections against demonic attack. Furthermore, Linjamaa looks into the scribes and their techniques and observes that the quality of the writing points to sloppy or novice scribes, who have been Christians, on account of the plethora of nomina sacra attested in the codex. The use of the sign of the cross in writing was a statement

of Christian identity and it was also thought to have protective powers. As Linjamaa also stresses, the content of NHC I expresses a strong interest in the influence of demons and other spiritual powers on human life.

*Alexandros Tsakos* in his article, ‘*On the materiality of manuscripts from Christian Nubia*’, investigates the forms of text carriers in a given society as an insight into how these texts were used. Tsakos discusses the manuscript culture of Christian Nubia as testimony of an elite literate minority in the Nubian society. Tsakos demonstrates that the materiality of the manuscripts illuminates important aspects of Nubian literary culture and the Nubian literati. The discussion is based on two case studies that analyses Christian Nubian literacy as evidenced in medieval Nubian manuscripts and Nubian codicology. Against the background of the particular geographical, cultural and historical characteristics of Christian Nubia, Tsakos gives an account of Old Nubian, Greek and Coptic manuscript testimonies (extant or in pieces and fragments) found in Nubian sites. He further discusses the complex history of the acquisition of complete manuscripts from medieval Nubia by Europeans and where these are preserved today. In this context, he concentrates on the codicological significance of works dedicated to the Cross. As Tsakos observes the creation of small-format codices related with the Cross as prayer books for monks and the existence of illuminations communicated the special relation of their donors and/or owners with the divine realm represented by the symbol of the Cross. Using as example, a Coptic manuscript of the Book of the Resurrection by the Apostle Bartholomew his analysis shows that this codex seems to come from a scriptorium from a Coptic milieu producing manuscripts to be used in Nubia by Nubians.

*Barbara Crostini* in her contribution ‘*The survival of the Sc/roll Format: Symbolic and Practical Performances*’, discusses a manuscript preserved in roll format from Byzantium, the so-called Joshua roll, which is a unicum among Greek manuscripts. The Joshua-roll is dated in the middle of the tenth century and consists of a ten-meter parchment strip but a dominant portion of it is occupied by images. Crostini suggests that by adopting a typically Jewish format yet realizing it in an iconically ‘Christian’ way, the Joshua Roll takes up the challenge of being a symbol for Christianity in continuity with the Jewish Old Testament and especially by its allusion to a Hexateuch. As Crostini maintains, the external aspect of the book should not be regarded as a marker of opposing identity but as an element in the cultural interplay of religious articulation. This unusual format might have been intended as a symbolic import in dialogue with the Jewish tradition of the Torah rolls. Furthermore, the Joshua story could have served as a proof-text for the cult of images debate, underlined by its remarkable

richness of illustrations. Crostini argues that the materiality of the book-object in the form of a specifically made book-roll preserved in a particular box would add a significant “symbolic” value to the book as artefact.

*Witold Witakowski*, in ‘*The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity: Some Remarks from an Oriental Christian Perspective*’ discusses a variety of aspects in Oriental Christian literary cultures as additional thoughts and contributions to Guy Stroumsa’s book. Witakowski stresses the importance of the Eastern and especially the Syriac Christian and Ethiopic book cultures in the scriptural universe of Christianity challenging thus the Eurocentric perspective, which often prevails in many of the thematically related publications. As Witakowski shows, Ethiopia’s scriptural culture developed in a geographical and cultural isolation, and in that sense, Ethiopia resembles a museum of ancient usage of written sources. Significantly, in spite of the transition of scroll to codex in Christian culture at its beginnings, - later to be adopted by the Muslim Arabs too-, the scroll was still used in the Christian Orient for specialised magical purposes with specific bodily adaptations, as well. Moreover, the magical use of text is documented in a variety of material media in Late Antiquity, such inscribed bowls which were very common in Mandaean, Jewish and Syriac Christian cultures. Witakowski adds that in the context of a discussion, of the history of the book and a book culture, we should not overlook the importance of the means and media of transportation and of the safekeeping of books. Other significant aspects to be included in a discussion of late antique book culture are the importance of apocryphicity in the context of the different canons applied by the Christian churches as well as issues of orality and textuality in the cultural context of the Christian Orient.

*Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala*, in ‘*Revisions and textual diachrony: More data on the Andalusī translation of the Gospels by Ishāq b. Balashk al-Qurtubī?*’, offers a study of the Andalusian Christian Arabic manuscript witnesses of the Gospels, investigating the history of the Christian Arabic codices of the New Testament texts produced and translated in Arabic by Christians, bilingual in Latin and Arabic. He especially focuses on the diachronic process of revision of the translations. As he argues the lexical and syntactic changes observed attest to the dynamical transmission process of the texts. Discussing questions of dating, authorship and palaeography, Monferrer-Sala concludes that taking into consideration the fact that translations of the New Testament circulated in al-Andalus in the ninth century, the original translations must have been prepared as early as in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Finally, Guy Stroumsa concludes in a Postface that the intention of his work on the Scriptural Universe, was to address the question about the status and roles of books in the world of early Christians as a historian of religions. Following Max Müller, he stresses that in order to understand religious phenomena, we need to study them within a broad, historical, cultural and social context. The end of the blood sacrifice, esp. among Jews, Christians and Manichaeans signifies a double paradigm shift, both cultural and religious. The core of the cultural paradigm shift, can be seen in the passage from scroll to codex as the common physical support of books, stressing thus the intertwined realities of religious and cultural histories.