## **The New Testament - configuring the beginnings of early Christianity**

What design of the beginnings of Christianity is conveyed to us in the text collection that is known to us today as the ‘New Testament’?

             In Irenaeus, but also all older NT manuscripts that we possess, the New Testament begins without preface – although prefaces to three individual gospels are preserved – straight with the first sub-collection of the Gospels. The order of the four Gospels within this sub-collection is less clear. Looking at Irenaeus, we have seen that he provides three different orderings, a historical-chronological order (*Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk*, *John*), a theological one (*John*, *Lk*, *Matt*, *Mk*) and one which seemingly reflects the copy that he followed in book III of his *Adversus haereses* (*Matt*, *Lk*, *Mk*, *John*).[[1]](#footnote-1)This instability might be caused by the fact that Irenaeus might have been the first to combine the four Gospels in a physical collection (perhaps of several codices), though he might not have been satisfied or dogmatic with it. Even looking at the existing papyri and manuscript witnesses, they do not let us determine a certain order of these Gospels that others would have followed,[[2]](#footnote-2) even if the two oldest full codices offer Irenaeus’ historical-chronological order,[[3]](#footnote-3) whereas others give them in the theological-hierarchical order, but still other arrangements can be found,[[4]](#footnote-4) and they do not seem to have been fixed and were already controversial in antiquity[[5]](#footnote-5) - in any case, however, the fourfold biography of Jesus of Nazareth, with which the collection of the New Testament begins, without the name of an author or editor, makes it abundantly clear to the readership that it is primarily an assemblage of witnesses about the protagonist of this biography. It is Jesus of Nazareth, especially the last year or years of his adult life, who is described and about whom the first sub-section brings together four narratives that are structurally and literarily similar, albeit with minor and major differences and contradictions. This opening sub-section dominates the New Testament, compared to which the rest of the New Testament seems like an addition which narrates what has happened after the death of the Protagonist. In this regard, Irenaeus’ collection is characterized by a massive shift compared to the balanced account of Marcion where the two sub-sections of the ‘Euangelion’ or the *Gospel* and the ‘Apostolos’ or the *Letters of Paul*, are roughly equal in length and weight.

Irenaeus has, however, not only given more weight to Jesus as protagonist of the New Testament, the different orderings of the four narratives give, as we have already indicated, different answers to the questions of the beginnings of Christianity. It is not without significance for the readers and their interpretation which of the Gospels first introduces to Jesus’ life and what resulted from it. And what does it mean for understanding the beginnings of Christianity when one reads the New Testament with Irenaeus and Augustine through rather historical glasses, in which the Gospels are given in the order of *Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk* and *John*, while not only Irenaeus also suggested to start with *John*, as apparently Tertullian and presumably other readers, such as some Valentinians, did who also preferred the theological-hierarchical order. Or what results from the combination of the accounts of the two apostles Johnand Matthewwhich are followed by the writings of the pupils of the apostles Paul and Peter, Luke and Mark, or in the reverse order of Mark and Luke? Even if I cannot pursue these questions further at this point, one would wish that New Testament scholars would not only devote themselves to studying individual Gospels, but also to the earliest collections and their various arrangements.

              Instead, scholars of New Testament studies focus on minute problems, perhaps because the explosion of monographs, encyclopedias, dictionaries, commentary series, articles and doctoral thesis are impossible to manage for any individual in this world. Even if methodological questions are raised and research topics dealt with that touch on different writings books of the New Testament, rarely is the New Testament seen as an entity or its sub-sections the object of a study. We only need to inspect the structure of the annual meetings of the world greatest scholarly gathering, of the ‘Society of Biblical Literature’, to sense that New Testament Studies have become a field of over-specialisms, where in different sections individual *Gospels* are dealt with, the different *Letters of Paul*, etc. There are panels on the ‘Synoptic Question’, on methodological approaches, non-canonical writings and auxiliary sciences, yet, there is no panel on the ‘Four Gospels’ nor on the ‘New Testament as a collection’, and so we are regrettably lacking more comprehensible approaches. Despite so many biblical commentary series, we do not have a single commentary that covers the four New Testament Gospels in a joint way, let alone one which would in addition comment on these together with further Gospels of the second and third centuries.

              In the introductory literature of the New Testament, the subject of the ‘New Testament’ is regularly dealt with under the heading of ‘canon formation’. The description of this formation is regularly based on the assumption of an established and reliable dating of these *Gospels* together with all other New Testament writings into the first century. Even if a determination of the time when the individual writings were written is important - I have dedicated a monograph myself to the dating of the canonical *Gospels*, where I disagree with the *opinio communis* -,[[6]](#footnote-6) it seems to me that a different approach is of greater importance, as I am trying to set out in this monograph here which deals with the Gospels as a collection within the wider collection of the New Testament. Of course, it would be an asset for us if we knew when each of the canonical writings of the New Testament was created, but as the scantiness and unreliability of the sources and the resulting variety of research opinions on the dating of these writings show, we often feel in the dark about them and mostly have to refer to internal arguments.

For a historical scholarship that consciously looks from the present into the past, it is of greater importance not when a text was presumably written and published, but from what point in time it appears visibly and has an impact on history. Even if in this regard, as we will see with a view to the New Testament, there can also be different interpretations of the so-called sources and their assessments, we are nevertheless on less slippery ground in this discussion than in the determination of an ‘original’ draft and its hypothetically assumed ‘Sitz im Leben’. Especially in a retrospective approach, one first comes across the evidence of a work, and this - here the New Testament - is to be addressed as a separate agent and to be interpreted in this context. For this reason, the subject of this chapter is the ‘New Testament’ as agent that is ‘configuring the beginnings of early Christianity’.

It is therefore necessary to explain how this collection was perceived at the time when it was being used first, before one can turn to the considerably more difficult and perhaps also less illuminating questions of when and by whom this collection was created and when the individual sub-collections were brought together in it and finally, at what point in time and by whom the books were written before they were regarded as a somehow coherent entity by a readership. And there is one more additional question to be answered when determining the date of the drawing up of individual writings. The earlier one places the origin of these writings like, for example, the Gospels, the more important the explanation becomes why a text that supposedly existed has remained in the dark and not left traces before it surfaced. The answer to this question becomes all the more urgent, when the time between the presumed drafting to the appearance in history spans over many decades.

Looking at the New Testament as it can be grasped historically, we will first have to consider the form in which it made its appearance and then go back retrospectively in order to determine its previous forms, whereby the historical perception of such forms will always be discussed first before we may search for potentially earlier layers.

Research into the phenomenon of the New Testament as a collection, as we know it today from the 28th edition of Nestle-Aland’s standard edition,[[7]](#footnote-7) leads us to the 5th and 4th centuries. The oldest complete edition of the New Testament can be found in the *Codex Sinaiticus*( א, 01), which contains all 27 writings in its New Testament part and was probably produced in the 4th century.[[8]](#footnote-8) The order of the New Testament writings in this Codex is as follows: The *Gospels* (*Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk*, *John*), *Paul’s Letters* (*Rom*, 1-2 *Cor*, *Gal*, *Eph*, *Phil*, *Col*, 1-2 *Thess*, *Heb*, 1-2 *Tim*, *Tit*, *Philem*), the *Praxapostolos* (*Acts*, *James*, 1-2 *Peter*, 1-3 *John*, *Jude*) and *Revelation*.

‘The other extant manuscript from the fourth centurz is the Codex Vaticanus(B 03). The arrangement of the writings varies from the Codex Sinaiticusin that the Praxapostolos is placed between the Tetraeuangelion and and the Corpus Paulinum. The manuscript breaks off in the middle of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 9:14), which follows 2 Thessalonians. So pastorals, the Letter to Philemon, and the Revelation of John are missing, due to the loss of the last part of this manuscript’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The *Codex Alexandrinus*(A, 02) and the *Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus*(C, 04) are manuscripts dated to the 5th century which originally contained all 27 scriptures that we now assign to the New Testament. The New Testament writings are available in the *Codex Alexandrinus*as in the *Codex Vaticanus*in the following order: *Gospels* (*Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk*, *John*), the *Praxapostolos* (*Acts*, *James*, 1-2 *Peter*, 1-3 *John*, *Jude*), *Paul’s Letters* (*Rom*, 1- 2 *Cor*, *Gal*, *Eph*, *Phil*, *Col*, 1-2 *Thess*, *Heb*, 1-2 *Tim*, *Tit*, *Philem*), and *Revelation*.

‘The fragmentary character of the Codex Ephraemi does not permit a detailed reconstruction of the original sequence of writings. Its pages had been detached, washed off, reused for the writings of the Syrian church father Ephraem, and then rebound’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As this overview shows and as David Trobisch pointed out, the writings were not included as individual texts in the collections of the 5th and 4th centuries, as otherwise one would expect them to be not present according to the same sequence, but in different combinations and in different order. However, as Trobisch rightly shows, they are present according to pre-existing groups or blocks which, like the *Gospels*, *Paul’s Letters* and the *Praxapostolos* had designations for these sub-groupings within the New Testament. Hence we are dealing with three or, if we want to take *Revelation* as a block in its own right, four sub-groupings that make up the New Testament in these codices: The *Gospels* (e), *Paul’s Letters* (p), the *Praxapostolos* (a) and *Revelation* (r).[[11]](#footnote-11) That we are, indeed, having to do with solid building blocks that form the bigger collection is also reflected in the extant New Testament papyri, in other New Testament codices and other external witnesses, especially Origen and Eusebius.[[12]](#footnote-12) In response to criticism of this finding[[13]](#footnote-13) Heilmann states:

‘In addition to the question of the order of the individual writings within the sub-collections, the survey of Trobisch clearly demonstrates the high consistency of the make of the sub-collections e, p, a, r across a long time span which is being manifest in the Greek manuscripts and also in some of the old translations ... Trobisch’s result remains valid that the organisation according to sub-collections in these big codices that were created independently of each other during the 4th and the 5th centuries must go back to an ancestor’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

If we follow Irenaeus again in his reading of this collection, the way he presents and makes use of the texts of this collection demonstrates that he perceived at least the *Gospels* and *Paul’s Letters* as sub-collections. Certainly we find, as shown, different orders in which the individual *Gospels* were possibly available to or ordered by him, but he too consciously understood these four *Gospels* as a unit, not only in the sense as Origen perceived them, namely as a collection of spiritual writings, but also as a reflection of the historical beginnings of Christianity. According to his foreword to Book III of *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus regarded ‘the Gospel’—the singular expresses the view of ​​the four *Gospels* being one entity—as a ‘mighty gift from the Lord to his apostles’. As Irenaeus adds, he himself ‘learned the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God’ from these witnesses. For him, the collection of the *Gospels* is therefore a historical document for the purpose of catechetical pedagogy.

              Irenaeus sees the process of conveying the Lord’s teaching in two stages. On the one hand, the apostles orally announced the ‘plan of salvation’ to the public, ‘later, according to the will of God, they communicated it in writings’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The written Gospels are therefore only the product of the oral apostolic transmission of the doctrine and the orally given doctrine by the Lord himself. Each of these levels is about catechetical doctrine, even if Irenaeus adds a historical reading to the last, the written layer.

              The emphasis that the *Gospels* were written down ‘according to the will of God’ is explained by the defensive stance in which Irenaeus finds himself. For, as he himself immediately states, his Valentine opponents criticized that the apostles had already preached before they had even had perfect knowledge. From this it can be concluded that Irenaeus located at least one position of criticism of this collection in the camp of the Valentinians. Maybe pressed by the Valentinians, Irenaeus took *Matthew* to be the historically oldest of the four *Gospels*, in order to take *John* as the last one, because, according to Irenaeus, ‘those who follow Valentinus, make extensive use of the Gospel according to John’,[[16]](#footnote-16) even though they also recognized ‘the other scriptures’ without understanding them correctly.[[17]](#footnote-17) This judgment of the Valentinians confirms that Irenaeus had a well-defined collection of writings in mind.

However, according to Irenaeus, the Valentinians were not the only ones who did not use the collection of the four *Gospels* in the way that he thought was right. In the first place he refers to the Ebionites who ‘exclusively’ used *Matthew* and would have also misinterpreted this text, whereby this group is mentioned here either because Irenaeus regarded them as the older heretics or because, according to him, they were the oldest misinterpreting the four *Gospels*.[[18]](#footnote-18) Surprisingly, however, the group of Cerinthians who were not initially identified by name at this point and who would have preferred *Mark* does not follow, but is preceded by Marcion, who in the eyes of Irenaeus circumcised *Luke*.

Not only according to Irenaeus, but also following the collection of the 27 writings, the history of Christianity begins with the birth of Jesus, depending on the arrangement of the *Gospels* in this collection, either following the two historical arrangements (*Matt*, *Lk*, *Mk*, *John*; 2. *Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk*, *John*) with the historical birth in Bethlehem, as described by *Matthew* at the beginning of his Gospel and supported by *Luke*, or following the theological hierarchy (*John*, *Lk*, *Matt*, *Mk*) with the salvation-historical placing of the Logos before all times as described by *John* at the beginning of his Gospel. If one takes this theological-hierarchical and salvation-historical order of the Gospels, the pre-existence and incarnation of Jesus Christ are emphasized, whereby the death of Christ, with which the collection of the *Gospels* closes, leads either to the testimony of Paul or the Ascension of *Acts*. If one takes the historical order of the *Gospels*, a great line begins with them, from the birth of Jesus through his Resurrection appearences, as they are first described in *Luke* for the area of ​​Jerusalem and its surrounding region, as described in *John* 20, and then as in *Matthew* reported for Galilee in *John* 21. From there the collection leads in turn to either the testimony of Paul or the history of the early church in the *Acts of the Apostles* with the added *Catholic Letters*. The entire collection, irrespective of the different order of the second and third sub-collections, seems to have closed with *Revelation*.

Because of the contradictory significance that the different ordering of the second and third sub-collections had, special attention is needed to both of them further below.

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1. See above, chapter 4,2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘We have no evidence of the manner in which the original manuscripts of the Gospels, or the first copies, were collected and united into one book’, so (Saydon 1950: 190) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Vaticanus*, *Codex Alexandrinus*; the first two manuscripts derive presumably from the 4th c., the third from the 5th c. This sequence can also be found in the often consulted and important work by Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* I 2,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Codex Bezae* and *Codex Washingtonianus*, both likely from the 5th c., offer the sequence *Matt*, *Joh*n, *Lk*, *Mk*. The same sequence can be found in the old latin versions. In contrast to the two sequences, a Syriac version from the 5th c. gives *Matt*, *Mk*, *John*, *Lk*, see (Saydon 1950: 190) In the *Canon Muratori*, though it is corrupt with text missing in the opening (the dating of the *Canon* is disputed and given as 2nd c. or 4th c.), offers in third place *Lk* and in 4th *John* and one might assume that prior to these we have *Matt* and *Mk*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tert., *Adv. Marc.* IV 2 offers the sequence *John*, *Matt*, *Lk*, *Mk*; Origen in various places, for example *Hom. in Jos.* 7,1 and *Hom. in Gen.* 13,2 gives: *Matt*, *Mk*, *Lk*, *John*, see Euseb. Caes., *Hist. eccl.* VI 25. This sequence can also be found in a number of authors of the 4th c., such as, for example, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Amphilochius of Ikonium and others. See on these and others (Saydon 1950: 191) With regard to the different sequences, it is difficult to understand, how it can be claimed that *Matt* always came first, *pace* (McNicol 2007: 15) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Vinzent 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Nestle, Aland, and Aland 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Trobisch 2000; 1996: 39) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Trobisch 2000: 24-25; 1996: 39). See also the concern with which David C. Parker (and JK Elliott before him) pointed out that we cannot be certain that the *Codex Vaticanus*contained the revelation, according to (Parker 2002: 302) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Trobisch 2000: 25; 1996: 39) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The abbreviations are derived from (Nestle, Aland, and Aland 2013: 40\*) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For evidence see (Trobisch 1996: 40-58) For the reception, criticism and discussion of Trobisch’s theses, see now (Heilmann 2018) Despite sound criticism of Trobisch’s hypothesis of a final edition of the New Testament, the existence of the four sub/collections has so far not been criticized by most researchers, see (Maurer 2002; Larson 2002) On the contrary, this part of Trobisch’s argument was even taken up productively and further developed as an important building block for the history of the canon and more closely interlinked than Trobisch did, for example, with the findings on the four Gospels in Irenaeus by (Bokedal 2014) While Schnelle thought that Trobisch had neglected deviations in the order within the sub-collections and pushed these incorrectly aside as unimportant, Heilmann shows that Trobisch had demonstrated that such deviations were not arbitrary, but went back and were explicable as conscious editorial decisions in the witnesses P46, D05, D06 and W032 and can be interpreted as editorial rearrangements of an *editio princeps*, see (Heilmann 2018: 25) See for further arguments, ibid. 25-42; (Schnelle 2017: 440) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (Schnelle 2017: 440) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. (Heilmann 2018: 27) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Iren., *Adv. haer.* III 1.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Iren., *Adv. haer.* III 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Iren., *Adv. haer*. III 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Iren., Adv. Haer. III 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)