

CHAPTER FIVE

T.C. SKEAT ON THE DATING AND ORIGIN OF CODEX VATICANUS

Biblical scholars are used to working with the text of Codex Sinaiticus [281] and Codex Vaticanus. We sometimes need to remind ourselves just how unique these manuscripts are.

Both are codices on parchment that originally included the whole of the Bible. Even complete copies of the New Testament are rare: my count is only sixty-one manuscripts out of 5,000 New Testament manuscripts and not all those were originally composed as complete manuscripts; in some cases one of the sections was added by a different and later hand. Then the age of these manuscripts is remarkable—they are our oldest Bibles in Greek. (Their dates will be considered shortly.) The fact that they contain not only the New Testament but the complete Bible in Greek makes these, together with Codex Alexandrinus and Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus exceptional. Even Latin pandects are rare. The fifty Bibles ordered by Constantine (about which more below) must therefore have been a very high proportion of all the complete Bibles written during the fourth century or, indeed, ever written.

The commonly agreed dates for Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus are fourth century; Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus are from the fifth century. Cavallo¹ suggested dates of 350 for Codex Vaticanus and 360 for Codex Sinaiticus—those suggestions by a famed expert ought to be weighed carefully. Kenyon² gives the date as “early fourth century” for both.

We ought to remind ourselves what was happening in the Christian world at that time.

There was a growing consensus about the content of the Christian [282] scriptures—the finally agreed canon was being shaped. It may plausibly be argued that texts like Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus

¹ G. Cavallo, *Ricerche sulla maiuscola biblica* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1967 = *Studi e testi di papirologia* 2) pp. 52–6, 60–1.

² F.G. Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible* 3rd. ed. by A.W. Adams (London: Duckworth, 1975) esp. pp. 78, 85.

were written precisely as templates to show which books ought to be included within one set of covers, and thus to provide concrete examples of the lists that were being produced by the likes of Athanasius in his 39th Festal Letter of 367. In this letter (written in Alexandria) we have a very early example of a listing of the books of the Old and New Testament. We shall return to that letter soon.

We are informed that the sequence of the New Testament books in the Festal Letter bears a close resemblance to Codex Vaticanus. In the Old Testament the order of the canonical books in Athanasius' letter agrees with that in Vaticanus,³ but the form in which the New Testament books appear in the manuscript of Codex Vaticanus agrees with the sequence in only the Greek form of the Festal Letter. In the Sahidic Coptic (and hence an Egyptian) form of Athanasius' letter Hebrews comes between 2 Corinthians and Galatians. That is close to, but not identical with a form known to a scribe who copied a series of marginal numerations into Vaticanus. This chapter numbering in Vaticanus is illogical because Ephesians begins at number 70 yet follows Romans-Galatians which ends at 58, but it implies that its predecessor, in Alexandria (so it is often argued), had Hebrews (numbered 59–69) after Galatians and before Ephesians, and thus bears comparison with the order in the Sahidic version of the Festal Letter. However, it is not exactly the same. The important point about these numbers is that they are not the work of either of the scribes of the manuscript but were added later, possibly in Constantinople.

[283] Some deduce from these facts that Codex Vaticanus may have been written in Alexandria but, as we shall see below, if Codex Vaticanus shares a common provenance with Codex Sinaiticus, which is certain, the completely different order of not only the New Testament but also the Old Testament books in Codex Sinaiticus must mean that they cannot be from Egypt as Sinaiticus does not share common sequences with Athanasius' lists. The contents of Sinaiticus also differ

³ Vaticanus has none of the books of Maccabees; Sinaiticus has 1 and 4 Maccabees, Alexandrinus has 1–4 Maccabees. Then there is the different order: B has the poetic books of the Old Testament preceding the prophetic as in the Festal Letter and Codex Vaticanus ends the Old Testament with Daniel, Sinaiticus ends with the poetic books concluding with Job, Alexandrinus also has the poetic books after the prophetic books but ends with Sirach. The textual character of the manuscripts differs both within the manuscript (cf. Vaticanus in Ezekiel and Isaiah), and between Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, because the writers of the manuscripts used a variety of different exemplars. See further chapter 32.