

Reviews



Garrick V. Allen, *Words Are Not Enough: Paratexts, Manuscripts, and the Real New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2024), pp. xviii + 198, ISBN 978-0802883353. £19.99

In this approachable book, Garrick Allen distils the findings of several major research projects on Greek New Testament manuscripts which he has led at the University of Glasgow. Written for a popular audience, there are similarities to Bart Ehrman's bestselling *Misquoting Jesus* (2005). Four of the five sections begin with autobiographical vignettes, offering glimpses of the author's scholarly journey. Likewise, the goal is to draw attention to an aspect of biblical scholarship of which general readers are often unaware, in this case the way in which the New Testament (and its interpretation) has been shaped across the centuries by additional material in the manuscript tradition. Although not expressed in so many words, Allen's contention is that *sola scriptura* is a concept alien to the material history of the Bible. Each generation has found that the canonical words are not enough in themselves, and so has supplemented them by a range of additional material in order to form them into books which both serve and reflect the community of users for whom they have scriptural status.

The book's five sections consider in turn various paratextual elements, each exemplified by different groups of New Testament writings. The first is presentation and layout, seen not just in ancient manuscripts but in a comparison of the Gospel according to Matthew in the early twentieth-century Scofield Bible and the ecological Green Bible of 2008. Second are titles, particularly in Greek manuscripts of Revelation and the Catholic Epistles. Third come cross-reference systems, namely the Eusebian apparatus to the Gospels and the Euthalian material in the latter part of the New Testament. Fourth are prefaces in the Greek tradition of the Acts of the Apostles. The fifth and final section treats annotations, from scribal corrections to marginal doodles. These broader divisions are distributed across thirteen chapters, offering manageable approaches which do not overwhelm a reader encountering this material for the first time. The twenty-four images of Greek manuscripts are indispensable for illustrating the



topics under discussion (although figure 8.2 is not the page described in the text).

Allen has a gift for pithy and provoking statements. For instance, the New Testament is characterised as ‘a body of literature defined by change’ (p. 6), ‘an omnibus of all its possible iterations’ (p. 54), or ‘a composite artwork’ (p. 167). We are told that paratexts ‘have revelatory potential’ (p. 167), ‘change the way we see text itself’ and ‘make Scripture into literature’ (p. 168). The overall theme of the book may be expressed in the observations that ‘Bibles are not self-sufficient or obvious’ (p. 34) and that ‘without paratexts there is no Bible’ (p. 89, cf. p. 169): ‘words are not enough because Bibles have never been just words’ (p. 5). While some may find such grandiose claims irritating, here they are largely justified as a way of underscoring Allen’s emphasis on the constructed nature of the Bible, as demonstrated by his detailed examples. It may come as a surprise, however, to discover in the final chapter that ‘the realities of paratexts and their many functions emphasize the *innate* value of the New Testament’ (p. 161, my emphasis) after all the effort which has gone into picking apart this composite concept. The implication that there is some form of inherent identity and quality to the New Testament as a whole seems to go against the fragmented picture arising from the book’s focus on individual manuscripts and the way in which their presentation shapes the reading experience. Yet it is precisely such an abstract idea of the New Testament which underlies the production of these handwritten copies: paratexts reflect the producers’ conceptualisation of the tradition, whereas inductive attempts to establish from the surviving artefacts what ‘the Real New Testament’ of the subtitle is will always fall short.

The book provides a wealth of information, opening windows onto the material history of the Bible. First-hand examination of numerous manuscripts enables Allen to highlight individual copyists or annotators and their place in the tradition. Equally, the major cataloguing projects which he has undertaken enable him to speak authoritatively about overall trends and the breadth of variation. It is striking that Euthalian Apparatus for Acts and the Epistles appears to be more widespread than the Eusebian Apparatus for the Gospels, at least in Greek (cf. p. 77). Even though the brevity of the volume means that only a selection of material can be discussed, there are places where additional consideration might be welcome. For example, in the chapter on titles and how they shape readers’ expectations, there is no mention that, in the earliest tradition, titles are found at the end



rather than the beginning of a text. Perhaps this is irrelevant, in that ancient readers would be used to this, but it still reflects a difference in practice. After all, reading the first line of Revelation clearly identifies the work even if Allen is right to assert that ‘There has never been one single title for the book of Revelation’ (p. 47). Allen recognises that ‘the paratextual valency of [the] material aspects of manuscript production’ awaits further exploration (p. 163): one example that comes to mind is the use of coloured ink in GA 16 to indicate different speakers, prefiguring later ‘red-letter Bibles’. The insights into users’ minds provided by annotations (ch. 12) may be supplemented by the striking and frequent observations of the scribe Neilos about the circumstances under which he copied the lectionary over-text of Codex Zacynthius.

Allen deliberately avoids the topic of textual variation between manuscripts. Nevertheless, he treats corrections in a single document as paratextual features on the grounds that, if the earlier reading is still legible, corrections provide readers with a choice (ch. 11). This is debatable: despite the challenge of determining the intention behind such interventions, marginal glosses and alternative readings constitute a recognised way to admit textual variety. The most obvious significance of corrections is as alterations to the text, not as deliberately supplied paratext. Allen’s treatment raises the question as to when text ends and paratext begins, while his inclusion of commentary among biblical paratexts suggests a capacious understanding of the latter. Again, it is not obvious why ‘ancient paratexts encourage readers to jump around’ within a volume but ‘printed Bibles are designed to encourage people to read front to back’ (p. 88): the presence of verse numbers in the latter is disruptive to the reading experience, yet constitutes a potent internal and external reference system, in contrast to the less interrupted text of most manuscripts.

With non-expert readers in mind, all Greek is translated and the presentation is kept straightforward without excessive simplification. Occasionally, technical terms are used which are not explained until later: for instance, *in scribendo* appears on p. 137 but is only glossed on the following page. Likewise, the uninitiated may not realise that ‘Codex H’ is the same as ‘GA 015’ on p. 78. Despite several occurrences of the phrase *nomen sacrum* – an abbreviation which might itself be considered a paratextual feature – I could not find a definition of this and it does not appear in the Index of Subjects. (Other potentially useful terms, such as ‘colophon’ or ‘alphabetical exercises’ are also lacking, although there are entries for



‘baseball’, ‘parables, spicy’ and ‘weird little guys’.) The bibliography is very up-to-date, and the publishers are to be thanked for enabling easy reference to further reading and details in footnotes rather than endnotes.

While the book is written in a conversational style, there are a few turns of phrase which I found confusing. What are ‘acclimations of faith’ and ‘the tangible residues of prayer’ which accompany them (p. 152)? Is ‘a more captious understanding’ something positive (p. 161)? Can ‘paratext’ really be used as a verb (cf. p. 94), and is ‘listical beauty’ (p. 168) a thing? More off-putting to some readers may be occasional snide asides, such as the observation that, unlike Jesus, ‘Most characters are not so active after their executions’ (p. 17) or ‘which, exactly, I’m not sure’ (p. 27) with reference to the forests supplying paper for the Green Bible. The inclusion of Greek text is very welcome, although it reveals that the word translated as ‘mysteries’ on p. 46 is actually *μαρτυρία*; the latter term is inconsistently rendered as both ‘testimonies’ and ‘witnesses’ in the table on p. 111.

Overall, this is a thought-provoking and illuminating book, and I will recommend it to students beginning postgraduate study as well as general readers who wish to learn more about the variety of the New Testament manuscript tradition. In the final analysis, however, the emphasis on the significance of manuscripts seems to be unduly restrictive. As Allen’s first section shows, paratexts are as much a part of modern printed Bibles as they are in medieval handwritten copies in Greek. The insights of this volume about how the presentation of the scriptural text frames and shapes its reception are by no means restricted to the manuscript tradition. Those who read Allen’s book will discover that the precedents for many contemporary practices extend back throughout the documentary history of these writings. As such, what this study offers is not a radically new understanding of biblical transmission but a demonstration of an under-appreciated continuity between ancient and modern approaches to the New Testament.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v33i1.3182>

