By any measure, Codex Zacynthius is a remarkable manuscript. It is understood to be one of the most important surviving New Testament manuscripts, and its huge appeal lies in its hidden backstory and the detective work to uncover its secrets.

Codex Zacynthius is a palimpsest: a manuscript from which the text has been scraped or washed off in order for it to be used again. The recycling of manuscripts was common practice at a time when writing surfaces were precious, few books were produced, and a tiny percentage of the population was literate. The surface of the parchment was first used some time in the eighth century when it was inscribed in Greek with a text from the Gospel of Luke. At the end of the twelfth century this was partially scraped away and written over with the text of an Evangeliarium, a book composed of passages from the Four Gospels.

Two hundred years ago this year, Codex Zacynthius was presented to General Colin Macaulay by Prince Comuto of the Ionian island of Zakynthos who then passed it on to the British and Foreign Bible Society. From 1983 the text was housed in the Bible Society’s collection at Cambridge University Library. When the Society put the Codex up for sale in 2013, Anne Jarvis, then University Librarian, launched a public campaign with the help of Rowan Williams and raised £1.1 million to acquire the manuscript. I’m very glad she did, and for all the support from individuals and national bodies, including the National Heritage Memorial Fund, that came together to make sure Codex Zacynthius remains open for scholarship for all time at one of the world’s greatest research libraries. The Library’s hope was that this would enable the manuscript to be the object of further detailed research, in order to read the palimpsest undertext for the first time and come to a better understanding of this document and its history. The announcement of funding for the Codex Zacynthius Project by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2017 was exactly the development for which the University Library had hoped in order to achieve this goal.

This book represents the Codex Zacynthius Project findings, which used cutting edge digital techniques to reveal the layers of text in the manuscript and revisited the findings of earlier research to discover the surprising neglect of the catena commentary, despite the pioneering work of J. Harold Greenlee. The application of multispectral imaging to the manuscript has enabled the project to make a full transcription and translation of the catena, now all freely available alongside these state-of-the-art images in the Cambridge Digital Library online.

The study of the biblical text indicates that Codex Zacynthius is a particularly important witness to the text of the Gospel according to Luke. The additional early
readings identified by the project on the basis of the new images are a valuable contribution to this field, and the presentation of the full text of the catena commentary is an important step for patristic scholars. The way in which these extracts were assembled and combined is a fascinating story of biblical interpretation in a period for which we have comparatively few records. The chapters in this book tease out some of the significance of this in terms of the exegetical activity of compilers and the theological implications of the selection of authors, not least the deliberate choice to include a polyphony of voices combining ‘orthodox’ and ‘discredited’ sources.

The proportion of the commentary in Codex Zacynthius which preserves writings from early Christian authors which have not been transmitted in direct tradition— together making up no less than three-quarters of the catena commentary in this manuscript—vividly illustrates how catenae preserve an otherwise lost tradition of Christian exegesis. In particular, this manuscript is of incomparable value in transmitting passages from Severus of Antioch in Greek.

While the palimpsest, understandably, has been the focus of much of the interest in this manuscript, I am very pleased to see that the Codex Zacynthius Project has also made a full investigation of the lectionary overtext. This will be an important contribution to further research into another aspect of Byzantine engagement with the Bible which, like catenae, has long been underappreciated. In this case, we are introduced to a memorable new figure in the person of the scribe Neilos, who wrote this lectionary at the end of the twelfth century. His complaints in the margins about his head hurting or his slowness in copying shine a new light on the task which he shared with hundreds of others across the centuries in the transmission of scripture and remind us of some of the human aspects of book production.

I would like to congratulate David Parker, Hugh Houghton and all members of the project on its successful completion. Both this book and the electronic resources created by the team will be of value to future scholarship in clarifying the place of Codex Zacynthius, both catena and lectionary, within history and tradition. As the contributors themselves acknowledge, this book marks a beginning rather than a definitive account. There is plenty more to occupy researchers in the study of this manuscript, such as the question of the date at which the catena was copied and the relation of Codex Zacynthius to other catenae traditions.

It is particularly good to learn that this book, as well as the electronic edition, will be published in open access, making the fruit of this research available to all who are interested. This includes the many members of the public who contributed to the campaign to purchase Codex Zacynthius. I hope that they too find that the studies in this volume confirm the importance of this manuscript and, two centuries later, the gift it remains to all who seek to study and learn more of the biblical texts it contains.

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