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The New Testament text

The present position in New Testament textual studies

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In the case of the New Testament it seems at first sight very serious that we have no manuscript of the complete New Testament earlier than the fourth century. To quote F. G. Kenyon:

For all the words of classical antiquity we have to depend on manuscripts written long after their original composition. The author who is in the best position in this respect is Virgil; yet the earliest manuscript of Virgil that we now possess was written some 350 years after his death. For all other classical writers, the interval between the date of the author and the earliest extant manuscript of his works is much greater. For Livy it is about 500 years, for Horace 900, for most of Plato 1,300, for Euripides 1,600. On the other hand, the great vellum uncials of the New Testament were written perhaps 250 years after the date when the Gospels were actually composed¹.

In addition, we now have papyri of considerable portions of the New Testament which reduce the interval by a further hundred years. For instance, two of the Bodmer Papyri (P66 and P75) are dated about AD 200². P66 preserves 94 per cent of John's Gospel, and it is clear from its corrections that it was itself a copy of two yet earlier manuscripts.

The existence of more than 100,000 small variants is not in reality an embarrassment. The problem of New Testament textual criticism arises from the gigantic scale of the task, if all materials are to be used to the full. In its simplest form the history of a text is like the growth of a tree. The stem of the tree is the original manuscript. When this is transcribed

1. F. G. KENYON, *The Story of the Bible*, London 1936, pp. 33, 34f. This statement of Kenyon did not take into account the fragments of the classics found among the papyri in his day and since. But they do not affect the argument, and his statement remains true after a further half-century.

2. B. M. METZGER, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1968, gives the basic information and bibliography on the subject. For these papyri, see pp. 39ff. K. and B. ALAND, *The Text of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1987 is also a mine of information.

certain mistakes are made, which are normally incorporated in all copies that are derived from it. Thus a branch of the tree grows, consisting of manuscripts that have certain characteristics in common. This subdivides again and again, forming new branches and twigs and shoots. Now if the manuscripts are arranged according to their greater and lesser common characteristics, it should theoretically be quite easy to sort out the family tree, and get back nearer and nearer to the common stem. A manuscript's importance will depend, not upon its date, but upon its place in the tree. Conceivably a fourteenth-century manuscript might have been carefully copied directly from a second-century one, which would give it an importance out of all proportion to its date³.

Another helpful line of study is provided by translations into other languages. The family tree of the version can be constructed, and this gives valuable evidence of the Greek text at the date when it was translated. A third line of study is provided by quotations in Christian writers. If the family tree of the manuscripts of the works of each Father is constructed, it may give valuable evidence as to the text in existence when he wrote.

But unfortunately the textual tree does not grow so simply. As E. C. Cowell says, 'We are dealing not with ordinary trees but with a thicket or jungle composed of banyans and mangroves, trees growing upside down dropping roots from branches'⁴.

Textual criticism made great strides from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The Renaissance brought back the New Testament in Greek to its rightful place as the only proper text for use in scholarly discussion. The Greek Testament of Erasmus, which was based mainly on seven fairly late manuscripts, was the foundation of the *Textus Receptus*⁵.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the collection and study of manuscripts proceeded apace, and progress was made in classifying them according to their general type of text. The publication in 1881 of *The New Testament in the Original Greek* by B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort marked a new epoch in textual criticism. In their lengthy introduction they argued that the time had come to jettison the text of the majority of manuscripts and to replace it with one based on the two fourth-century manuscripts *Codex Vaticanus* (known by the symbol B) and *Co-*

3. J. W. WENHAM, *Christ and the Bible*, Guildford, Surrey 1993, p. 179.

4. E. C. COLWELL, "The Significance of Grouping of New Testament MSS", *New Testament Studies* 4 (1958), p. 88.

5. J. W. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

dex Sinaiticus (ℵ). Although Hort's theory was opposed by a handful of distinguished scholars, notably J. W. Burgon, F. H. A. Scrivener and H. C. Hoskier, it quickly won the day.

During the twentieth century further strides have been made in collecting and studying the material. Since Hort's day, many new papyri containing parts of the New Testament have been discovered, a number dating from the fourth or third century or even earlier. Scores of scholars have toiled away at these manuscripts and immense labour is being spent on the critical editions of the ancient versions and the Fathers. Merely to give an incomplete list of the versions considered to have relevance shows how monumental the task is: Old Latin (Italian, African and Spanish forms), Vulgate, Syriac (six varieties), Coptic (five varieties), Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Sogdian, Old Slavonic. The study of Tatian's Diatessaron, a Syriac harmony of the Gospels, first published about AD 170, and eventually translated into many languages, forms an independent segment of the field, highly complex, but promising valuable results. An illustration of the importance of the Fathers is to be seen in the minute examination to which the biblical quotations of Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem have been subjected in the quest for the Caesarean text.

All this has given increased knowledge of what the third- and second-century texts must have been like. G. D. Kilpatrick considers it to be proved that our tradition reaches back before the time when the four Gospels circulated as a single Canon; before, that is, about 140 AD. He also declares that, in spite of our detailed knowledge of first- and second-century Greek, 'no one has so far shown that the New Testament is contaminated with the grammar or orthography of a later period'⁶.

In spite of all this labour and all this growth in knowledge, it has to be admitted that modern textual criticism has reached something of an impasse. The quest for early patterns of text has been disappointing and the exercise of supposedly 'rational criticism' has led widely varying and quite insecure results. The question needs to be asked whether we are suffering from some far-reaching fault in critical method. There is reason to think that we are. Hort's whole argument was organized to discredit

6. G. D. KILPATRICK, "Transmission of the New Testament and Its Reliability", *Trans. of Victoria Inst.* 89 (1957), pp. 97.

what as a young man he once called 'that vile Textus Receptus'⁷. Ever since Hort's time, scholars have been wont to declare, not only the Textus Receptus, but the whole Byzantine type of text, to be corrupt. Hort's case merits fuller statement and closer examination.

It was based mainly on three contentions. Firstly, he argued that the original text of the New Testament divided into four main branches at a comparatively early date. He maintained that three of these branches, the Western text, the Alexandrian text and the Byzantine (he called it Syrian) text - owed their origin to revisions carried out in particular localities, while the fourth (the Neutral text) had remained fairly close to the original. This would mean that we were dealing, not with hundreds of independent witnesses, but with four. And these four were of very different value, the Western and Alexandrian being inferior to the Neutral text, and the Byzantine text being inferior to all three.

Secondly, he sought to explain the unity-in-diversity of the Byzantine type of text by postulating one or more official revisions in the third and fourth centuries, which had laid their stamp on the main textual tradition of the Greek-speaking Church. These revisions, he argued, had made use of the known variants in the earlier text-types, blending and harmonizing them to make a full and lucid text.

Thirdly, he sought to prove this by asserting that distinctively Byzantine readings were not to be found either in the earliest known manuscripts or in the quotations of Christian writers before the middle of the third century.

But all these contentions are dubious. Hort's position has been examined in detail in W. N. Pickering's book, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*⁸. He shows that it is not true, even approximately, that the four supposed branches are sufficiently homogeneous to be traceable back to four common sources; the variants come in an infinitely complex number of permutations and combinations, and represent many independent witnesses, not just four. Further, the so-called Neutral text shows signs of editing at least as much as the other text-types.

The Western text has largely disintegrated as a result of attempts to identify new early groupings. For instance, a so-called Caesarean text-type has been widely acclaimed, supposedly already known in Egypt round

7. A. F. HORT, *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort*, London 1896, Vol. I, p. 211.

8. W. N. PICKERING, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, New York 1977.

about AD 250, used at times by Origen and influential well into the Middle Ages. Hardly had this text-type been postulated than it began to disintegrate into pre-Caesarean and Caesarean types. The Alexandrian texts too were regrouped as Alexandrian and Proto-Alexandrian.

A particularly unfortunate thing about Hort's postulation of official revision(s)⁹ is that it has discouraged study of manuscripts of the Byzantine type, except for those which are in some way uncharacteristic.

Finally, Byzantine readings are in fact common in the early Fathers and they have also been turning up frequently in the very early papyri which have been discovered since Hort's day. Bit by bit, readings of this type have been creeping back into the critical texts of the New Testament. For instance, the United Bible Societies' text of 1966 is reckoned by the editors to be 80 per cent Westcott and Hort, 15 per cent Textus Receptus and 5 per other sources¹⁰. H. A. Sturz¹¹ has shown that many readings (some 150 in fact) which Hort regarded as purely Byzantine and therefore as late intrusions into the text have turned up in the papyri. There are over eighty of these papyri, dating mostly from the second to the fifth century.

The importance attached to the earliest manuscripts by the nineteenth-century critics was natural enough, but there was a tendency to overlook a significant fact, namely, that the survival of manuscripts is much influenced by climate. Egypt with its dry climate is by far the most likely place for manuscripts to survive. That Alexandria boasts the most ancient manuscripts may simply be due to climatic chance.

The great question is this: If there was no official revision which laid its stamp upon the great majority of manuscripts, how are to explain the great diversity, yet relative homogeneity, of the traditional text? The only satisfactory answer seems to be that such homogeneity stem from an exceedingly early text - virtually, that is, from the autographs. This would have been the natural result of independent copying. Different copyists make different mistakes and different local editors make different judgments in their attempts to transmit a true text. But any one copyist or editor will transmit many more correct readings than he will faulty ones. Any particular wrong reading may be passed on, but usually only to a

9. Such revision is still part of the Aland theory, see *Text of NT*, pp. 50-51.

10. J. W. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

11. H. A. STURZ, *The Byzantine Text-Type and New Testament Criticism*, Nashville 1984.

small minority of manuscripts, whereas the correct reading will usually be passed on to the great majority of manuscripts. This means that, although new variants will keep occurring with the passage of time, the proportion of manuscripts retaining the original reading at any time will almost always exceed by a large amount the proportion exhibiting an innovative reading¹².

It may well be that textual criticism's need is to give up its trust in B and \aleph - and to search for the most primitive form of the Byzantine text. For those who have been brought up on Hort's theory, this demand a complete intellectual somersault. Or, to put it more accurately it will demand that they stand on their heads to read their textual apparatus. It will mean that the most despised symbol 'Byz' (the reading of the majority of Byzantine manuscripts) becomes a symbol of great respect and that the most honoured symbols B and \aleph become symbols of grave suspicion.

There are indeed a number of good reasons for such suspicion. Hort's predilection for these two manuscripts seems to have been based partly on his adherence to the maxim *lectio brevior potior* - the shorter reading is to be preferred. Both \aleph and B frequently have short readings. If shorter readings are to be preferred, then \aleph and B have a certain claim. But the maxim is quite dubious. According to C. D. Kilpatrick *lectio longior potior* to be probably sounder. Bernard Orchard, who has copied out the Greek text of the four Gospels by hand three times, tell that his commonest mistake was inadvertent omission¹³. P. M. Head, writing on scribal habits in the papyri says: 'omission is the more common scribal habit. If early scribes were more likely to omit words and phrases from their texts (for whatever reasons) it follows that we should not prefer the shorter reading, but rather prefer the longer reading (other factors being equal)'¹⁴.

Hort's reliance on these manuscripts also sprang in fact from their age. They were the two earliest manuscripts available in his day which contained large sections of the New Testament, but, as we have seen their

12. J. W. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 187ff.

14. *Biblica* 71 (1990), p. 247. J. R. ROYSE, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, Graduate Theological Union 1981, pp. 601, 602, (as quoted by Head) examines six of the most important papyri and the same conclusion is reached: "the fact is that the six papyri studied here all demonstrate a tendency to shorten the text", and so he argues that a more reliable principle - at least for the period of the papyri - would seem to be *lectio longior potior*.

survival may well be due to climatic factors more than anything else. The discovery of so many papyri since his day has fundamentally shifted the whole balance of the argument. Furthermore, the scribes of both these manuscripts are demonstrably careless and given at times to improving rather than copying their exemplars¹⁵.

Two attempts have been made recently to recover the most ancient form of the Byzantine text. Both rely considerably on the researches of H. F. von Soden and his team, who made an attempt (running to nearly 3.000 pages) to classify the Byzantine manuscripts¹⁶.

Z. C. Hodges and A. L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982) normally use von Soden to determine the number of manuscripts supporting a particular variant. If there is a clear majority in favour (60 per cent or more), that reading is adopted. If the number is fairly evenly divided, other criteria are used. In the case of the Apocalypse the manuscripts tend to be evenly divided throughout, so the editors attempt to construct a genealogical tree and to use this guide in the choice of readings.

M. A. Robinson and W. G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek According to the Byzantine Majority Textform* (Atlanta: Original Word, 1991) believe that it is not possible to construct even this modest amount of genealogical tree, and they revert strictly to the principles of J. W. Burgon. This involves in part counting manuscripts, the presumption being (if other things are equal) that the older a reading is the greater is the number of its offspring likely to be. This criterion of number is important, but it is always necessary to make sure that Burgon's other six principles are satisfied: antiquity, variety, continuity and respectability of witnesses and reasonableness of content and context.

15. Regarding \aleph , this was a major conclusion of M. A. ROBINSON'S doctoral thesis: *Scribal Habits Among Manuscripts of the Apocalypse*, Ph. D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth TX 1982. J. M. BOVER (quoted by H. A. STURZ, p. 121) says concerning kinds of alterations which characterize the various text-types: "The important... deviations are found in the Alexandrians and the Westerns, the slight ones in the Antiochians / i.e. Byzantines/... BgD manage the axe or the scalpel, the Antiochians, the file or varnish. Hoskier also raises the question as to which text is responsible for the greatest revising. His answer is that "the B group should be given the palm".

16. J. F. von SODEN, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments in ihrer ältesten erreichbaren Textgestalt*, Goettingen 1902-13.

The pro-Byzantine editors produce a text in which variant readings of importance are incomparably fewer than in the Hotian text¹⁷. If they are right, this would mean that the great preoccupation with textual matters in modern New Testament study has largely been an unnecessary use of time and energy, as far as the recovery of the original text is concerned, and its results seriously misleading¹⁸.

This is shown most clearly when the modern texts leave out two sizeable passages which appear in almost all Byzantine manuscripts -the last twelve verses of Mark¹⁹ and the account of the woman taken in adultery in John 7:53-8:11- and some hundreds of other words and phrases. The best Byzantine texts, however, are not entirely reflected in the Textus Receptus of Erasmus or the King James Version. The Robinson-Pierpont text gives no place to Luke 17:36; Acts 8:37; 15:34; 24:7 and parts of other verses, like the famous I John 5:7. This passage is demonstrably no part of the original Greek text. It first made its appearance in Latin, probably not before the fourth century. All told, both the Hodges-Farstad and the Robinson-Pierpont texts differ from the received text at some 1.500 places.

To claim for this that it is an approximation to the original faces one weighty objection. If the original text was of the Byzantine type, why are there no examples of this text-type to be found in the authorities closest in time to the original? No papyrus, no codex earlier than Alexandrinus (fifth century), no writer earlier than Asterius (fourth century) exhibits this text -why not?

Robinson would argue that in the early part of her history the Church suffered much persecution. Prior to the time of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, communication between the scattered branches of the Church was often difficult and the Church's sacred books were a particular target for the persecutor's zeal. The books were often kept hidden and were clandestinely copied by amateur copyists. This meant that many errors crept into the text. These miscellaneous errors would have been entirely local in character and they would have left the greater part of any manuscript true to the original text. As communications improved and the standard of copying rose the local errors would be

17. J. W. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

18. *Ibid.*

19. The authenticity of Mark 16:9-20 was ably argued not long ago by W. R. FARMER, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, Cambridge 1970.

gradually noticed and eliminated and the original readings restored. Thus at any on time the original reading would have been far commoner than the local error. And so it has remained since, and therefore, seeing that we do not posses the materials to construct genealogical trees, our safest method is to examine the degree of manuscript support for and against a particular reading. If a variant is supported by a substantial (say more than 70 per cent) majority of the Greek manuscripts²⁰, that reading may be accepted with some confidence as the original. This method effectively eliminates the subjective element of most text-critical speculation and restores external evidence to its position of primacy. The upholders of the Byzantine text need to expound the case more thoroughly and submit it to the rigorous scrutiny of the experts in the field. In any case it can be safely said that the Hort text on the one hand and the majority text on the other present rough limits beyond which the true text is not likely to be found. Should the Hort text prove to be right (which I consider most unlikely), it is still a text in which the truths of the faith continue to shine out great clarity in spite of a penumbra of doubtful readings. It remains an effective channel for the Word of God. If, however, the Byzantine text is approximately correct the fringe of doubt has almost disapeared and the Christian has a marvellously solid text.

20. J. W. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 215.