

## “CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF [EGYPT]?”

Wilbur N. Pickering, ThM PhD

During the last hundred and some years it has been a commonplace of New Testament textual criticism to argue that the Alexandrian text-type is the most reliable, among those available, and should receive the most consideration in any attempt to reconstruct the original text of the New Testament. It has been and continues to be the dominant point of view. Anyone who uses a UBS or Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text is, in effect, subscribing to that position, as is anyone who uses a version based upon them (almost all modern versions in English). That much is fact, but is it a good thing? There are over 6,000 differences between UBS<sup>3</sup> and the form of text exhibited by the vast majority of Greek MSS. (Many variations are more or less minor, but many are significant and not a few are serious, some exceedingly so.) Not infrequently, UBS<sup>3</sup> follows a few Egyptian witnesses against the united voice of the rest of the world (including some other Egyptian witnesses). Does not prudence suggest a query at this point? Namely, what are Egypt's claims upon our confidence—why should we listen to Egypt against the rest of the world?

I will write from the standpoint of those who believe and/or claim that the New Testament is God's Word—“All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). But why would God bother to provide a written revelation? If His purpose was to limit His communication to a single individual, community or people, at a given point in history, He would presumably use the spoken medium. If His purpose was to reach all peoples and all (subsequent) generations, then the written medium would be indicated. 2 Timothy 3:16 gives some account of the purpose, or at least the usefulness, of Scripture—something not limited to one generation. The Old Testament, at least, was written for the benefit of succeeding generations, to the end of the ages (1 Chronicles 16:15, 1 Corinthians 10:11). The point is, if God wants His written revelation to benefit future generations, it must be preserved for them. Also, it must be recognized for what it is. In other words, when the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writings He had to have a plan for making sure they would be recognized as Scripture (canonicity) and faithfully transmitted down through the centuries (preservation).

So, how would God proceed so as to achieve these two objectives? He evidently worked through the Church, using godly men. The Apostles knew they were writing Scripture, and the surviving writings of the earliest Church Fathers (1st and 2nd centuries) show clearly that they recognized and used the New Testament writings as Scripture (I have spelled out the evidence in *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, chapter 5). Irenaeus wrote before the year 200. In his surviving writings he quotes from every New Testament book except Philemon and 3 John, but he may have used them too in other writings that have not reached us. Evidently the dimensions of the New Testament Canon recognized by Irenaeus are very close to what we hold today. I emphasize the early, virtually immediate, recognition of the canonicity of the NT writings because it is a crucial factor for a correct understanding of what happened in their transmission.

What factors would be important for guaranteeing, or at least facilitating, a faithful transmission of the text of the NT writings? I submit that there are three controlling factors: an appropriate attitude toward the Text, proficiency in the source language and access to the Autographs (at the beginning). There are doubtless other, lesser factors but I will content myself with discussing these three. [Chapter 5 now includes ‘The strength of the Church’, also a significant factor.] First, the appropriate attitude.

### **Attitude toward the Text**

Where careful work is required, the attitude of those to whom the task is entrusted is of the essence. Are they aware? Do they agree? If they do not understand the nature of the task, the quality will probably do down. If they understand but do not agree, they might even resort to sabotage—a damaging eventuality. In the case of the NT books we may begin with the question: "Why would copies be made?" We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the NT writings from the start, so the making of copies would have begun at once.

The authors clearly intended their writings to be circulated, and the quality of the writings was so obvious that the word would get around and each assembly would want a copy. That Clement and Barnabas quote and allude to a variety of N.T. books by the turn of the first century makes clear that copies were in circulation. A Pauline corpus was known to Peter before 70 A.D. Polycarp (XIII) [c. 115], in answer to a request from the Philippian church, sent a collection of Ignatius' letters to them, possibly within five years after Ignatius wrote them. Evidently it was normal procedure to make copies and collections (of worthy writings) so each assembly could have a set. Ignatius referred to the free travel and exchange between the churches and Justin to the weekly practice of reading the Scriptures in the assemblies [they had to have copies].

A second question would be: "What was the attitude of the copyists toward their work?" We already have the essence of the answer. Being followers of Christ, and believing that they were dealing with Scripture, to a basic honesty would be added reverence in their handling of the Text, from the start. And to these would be added vigilance, since the Apostles had repeatedly and emphatically warned them against false teachers. As the years went by, assuming that the faithful were persons of at least average integrity and intelligence, they would produce careful copies of the manuscripts they had received from the previous generation, persons whom they trusted, being assured that they were transmitting the true text. There would be accidental copying mistakes in their work, but no deliberate changes. It is important to note that the earliest Christians did not need to be textual critics. Starting out with what they knew to be the pure text, they had only to be reasonably honest and careful. I submit that we have good reason for understanding that they were especially watchful and careful.

But, as Christianity spread and began to make an impact on the world, not everyone accepted it as "good news". Opposition of various sorts arose. Also, there came to be divisions within the larger Christian community—in the NT itself notice is taken of the beginnings of some of these tangents. In some cases faithfulness to an ideological (theological) position evidently became more important than faithfulness to the NT Text. Certain it is that Church Fathers who wrote during the second century complained bitterly about the deliberate alterations to the Text perpetrated by "heretics". Such a scenario was totally predictable. If the NT is in fact God's Word then both God and Satan must have a lively interest in its fortunes. To approach the textual criticism of the NT without taking due account of that interest is to act irresponsibly.

### **Proficiency in the Source Language**

As a linguist (PhD) and one who has dabbled in the Bible translation process for some years, I affirm that a 'perfect' translation is impossible. (Indeed, a tolerably reasonable approximation is often difficult enough to achieve.) It follows that any divine solicitude for the

precise form of the NT Text would have to be mediated through the language of the Autographs—Greek. Evidently ancient Versions (Syriac, Latin, Coptic) may cast a clear vote with reference to major variants, but precision is possible only in Greek (in the case of the NT). That by way of background, but our main concern here is with the copyists.

To copy a text by hand in a language you do not understand is a tedious exercise—it is almost impossible to produce a perfect copy. You virtually have to copy letter by letter and constantly check your place. (It is even more difficult if there is no space between words and no punctuation, as was the case with the NT Text in the early centuries.) But if you cannot understand the text it is very difficult to remain alert. Consider the case of P<sup>66</sup>. This papyrus manuscript is perhaps the oldest (c. 200) extant NT manuscript of any size (it contains most of John). It is one of the worst copies that we have. It has an average of roughly two mistakes per verse—many being obvious mistakes, stupid mistakes, nonsensical mistakes. I have no qualms in affirming that the person who produced P<sup>66</sup> did not know Greek. Had he understood the text he would not have made the number and sort of mistakes that he did.

Now consider the problem from God's point of view. To whom should He entrust the primary responsibility for the faithful transmission of the NT Text? If the Holy Spirit is going to take an active part in the process, where should He concentrate His efforts? Presumably fluent speakers of Greek would have the inside track, and areas where Greek would continue in active use would be preferred. For a faithful transmission to occur the copyists had to be proficient in Greek, and over the long haul.

### **Access to the Autographs**

This criterion probably applied for less than a hundred years (the Autographs were presumably worn to a frazzle in that space of time) but it is highly significant to a proper understanding of the history of the transmission of the Text. Already by the year 100 there must have been many copies of the various books (some more than others) while it was certainly still possible to check a copy against the original, should a question arise. The point is that there was a swelling stream of faithfully executed copies emanating from the holders of the Autographs to the rest of the Christian world. In those early years the producers of copies would know that the true wording could be verified, which would discourage them from taking liberties with the text.

However, distance would presumably be a factor—for someone in north Africa to consult the Autograph of Ephesians would be an expensive proposition, in both time and money. I believe we may reasonably conclude that in general the quality of copies would be highest in the area surrounding the Autograph and would gradually deteriorate as the distance increased. Important geographical barriers would accentuate the tendency.

Around the year 208 Tertullian claimed that the Apostles' "own authentic" writings were still being read in the churches that received them. This expression might be understood to refer to the Autographs, although it seems scarcely possible that they could have survived so long, but at least it must mean that the respective churches were using exact copies. Was anything else to be expected? For example, when the elders of the Ephesian church saw the Autograph of Paul's letter to them getting frazzled, would they not carefully execute an identical copy for their own continued use? Would they allow the Autograph to perish without making such a copy? Would **you**? I believe we are obliged to conclude that in the year 200 the Ephesian church was still in a position to affirm the precise original wording of her letter (and so for the other holders of Autographs)—but this is coeval with P<sup>46</sup>, P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup>!

## Who held the Autographs?

Speaking in terms of regions, Asia Minor may be safely said to have had twelve (John, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Philemon, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 and 3 John, and Revelation), Greece may be safely said to have had six (1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Titus in Crete), Rome may be safely said to have had two (Mark and Romans)—as to the rest, Luke, Acts and 2 Peter were probably held by either Asia Minor or Rome; Matthew and James by either Asia Minor or Palestine; Hebrews by Rome or Palestine; while it is hard to state even a probability for Jude it was quite possibly held by Asia Minor. Taking Asia Minor and Greece together, the Aegean area held the Autographs of at least eighteen (two-thirds of total) and possibly as many as twenty-four of the twenty-seven New Testament books; Rome held at least two and possibly up to seven; Palestine may have held up to three [but in A.D. 70 they would have been sent away for safe keeping, quite possibly to Antioch]; Alexandria (Egypt) held **none**. The Aegean region clearly had the best start, and Alexandria the worst.

### So, What about Egypt?

How does Egypt rate in terms of the three controlling factors discussed above? First, when did Christianity come to Egypt, and how strong was the Church there during the first and second centuries? I am not aware of any apostolic ministry in Egypt, although there is tradition to the effect that Mark the Evangelist labored there. The main line of advance seems to have been north into Asia Minor and west into Europe. If the selection of churches to receive the glorified Christ's "letters" (Revelation 2 and 3) is any guide, the center of gravity of the Church seems to have shifted from Palestine to Asia Minor by the end of the first century. (The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome's armies in A.D. 70 would presumably be a contributing factor.) Kurt Aland agrees with Adolf Harnack that "about 180 the greatest concentration of churches was in Asia Minor and along the Aegean coast of Greece." (*The Text of the New Testament*, K. and B. Aland, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 53). It is interesting to note that C.H. Roberts, in a scholarly treatment of the Christian literary papyri of the first three centuries, seems to favor the conclusion that the Alexandrian church was weak and insignificant to the Greek Christian world in the second century (*Schweich Lectures 1977*, British Academy, pp. 42-43, 55-57).

It is possible to evaluate their attitude toward the Text? Well, Aland states: "Egypt was distinguished from other provinces of the Church, so far as we can judge, by the early dominance of gnosticism" (*The Text*, p. 59). He further informs us that "at the close of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century " the Egyptian church was "dominantly gnostic" and then goes on to say: "The copies existing in the gnostic communities could not be used, because they were under suspicion of being corrupt" ("The Text of the Church?", *Trinity Journal*, 1987, 8NS:138). Now this is all very instructive—what Aland is telling us, in other words, is that up to A.D. 200 the textual tradition in Egypt **could not be trusted**. Aland's assessment here is most probably correct. Notice what Bruce Metzger says about the early church in Egypt:

Among the Christian documents which during the second century either originated in Egypt or circulated there among both the orthodox and the Gnostics are numerous apocryphal gospels, acts, epistles, and apocalypses. . . . There are also fragments of exegetical and dogmatic works composed by Alexandrian Christians, chiefly Gnostics, during the second century. . . . In fact, to judge by the comments made by Clement of Alexandria, almost every deviant Christian sect

was represented in Egypt during the second century; Clement mentions the Valentinians, the Basilidians, the Marcionites, the Peratae, the Encratites, the Docetists, the Haimetites, the Cainites, the Ophites, the Simonians, and the Eutyctites. What proportion of Christians in Egypt during the second century were orthodox is not known (*Early Versions*, p. 101).

It is almost enough to make one wonder whether Isaiah 30:1-3 might not be a prophecy about NT textual criticism!

The school of literary criticism that existed at Alexandria would also be a negative factor, if it influenced the Church at all, and W. R. Farmer argues that it did.

But there is ample evidence that by the time of Eusebius the Alexandrian text-critical practices were being followed in at least some of the scriptoria where New Testament manuscripts were being produced. Exactly when Alexandrian text-critical principles were first used . . . is not known. (*The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 14-15. He cites B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 1924, pp. 111, 122-123.)

He goes on to suggest that the Christian school founded in Alexandria by Pantaenus, around 180, was bound to be influenced by the scholars of the great library of that city. The point is, the principles used in attempting to "restore" the works of Homer would not be appropriate for the NT writings when appeal to the Autographs, or exact copies made from them, was still possible.

To the extent that the roots of the allegorical approach that flourished in Alexandria during the third century were already present, they would also be a negative factor. Since Philo of Alexandria was at the height of his influence when the first Christians arrived there, it may be that his allegorical interpretation of the OT began to rub off on the young church already in the first century. A literalist is obliged to be concerned about the precise wording of the text since his interpretation or exegesis hinges upon it. Since an allegorist is going to impose his own ideas on the text anyway, he would presumably have fewer inhibitions about altering it—precise wording would not be a high priority.

How about proficiency in Greek? The use of Greek in Egypt was already declining by the beginning of the Christian era. Bruce Metzger observes that the Hellenized section of the population in Egypt "was only a fraction in comparison with the number of native inhabitants who used only the Egyptian languages" (*The Early Versions of the New Testament*, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 104). By the third century the decline was evidently well advanced. I have already argued that the copyist who did P<sup>66</sup> (c. 200) did not know Greek. Now consider the case of P<sup>75</sup> (c. 220). E.C. Colwell analyzed P<sup>75</sup> and found about 145 itacisms plus 257 other singular readings, 25% of which are nonsensical. From the pattern of mistakes it is clear that the copyist who did P<sup>75</sup> copied letter by letter! ("Scribal Habits in Early Papyri: A Study in the Corruption of the Text" *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J.P. Hyatt, Abingdon Press, pp. 374-76, 380.) This means that he did not know Greek—when transcribing in a language you know you copy phrase by phrase, or at least word by word. Aland argues that before 200 the tide had begun to turn against the use of Greek in the areas that spoke Latin, Syriac or Coptic, and fifty years later the changeover to the local languages was well advanced (*The Text*, pp. 52-53).

By the fourth century the level of proficiency in Greek to be found in Egypt must have been seriously reduced, yet it produced the two most important witnesses usually attributed to the Alexandrian text-type. The parchment codices B (Vaticanus) and Aleph (Sinaiticus) are assigned to the fourth century and are generally understood to have been produced in Egypt (see Farmer, p. 37). H.C. Hoskier, after filling 450 pages with a detailed and careful discussion of the errors in Codex B and another 400 on the idiosyncrasies of Codex Aleph, affirms that in the Gospels alone these two manuscripts differ well over 3,000 times, which number does not include minor errors such as spelling, nor even variants between certain synonyms (*Codex B and its Allies*, Bernard Quaritch, 1914, II, 1). Now then, simple logic imposes the conclusion that one or the other must be wrong 3,000+ times—that is, they have over 3,000 mistakes between them (just in the Gospels). F.H.A. Scrivener said of Codex B:

One marked feature, characteristic of this copy, is the great number of its omissions. . . . That no small portion of these are mere oversights of the scribe seems evident from the circumstance that this same scribe has repeatedly written words and clauses **twice over**, a class of mistakes which Mai and the collators have seldom thought fit to notice, . . . but which by no means enhances our estimate of the care employed in copying this venerable record of primitive Christianity. (*A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., George Bell and Sons, 1894, I, 130.)

Even F.J.A. Hort, who esteemed Codex B above all other witnesses, conceded that the scribe of B "reached by no means a high standard of accuracy." (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, MacMillan and Co., 1881, 11, 233.) Codex Aleph is acknowledged on every side to be worse than Codex B in every way.

Finally, how about access to the Autographs? Well, on this score Egypt was really in a bad way. Not only did the Egyptian church have none itself, but even the nearest ones were probably no closer than Jerusalem, and even so only until A.D. 70. The vast majority were across the Sea. If the Church got off to a slow start in Egypt, and remained weak into the second century (not to mention the gnostic influence), we may wonder to what extent they would feel the need, or be willing to pay, to consult the Autographs.

### Conclusion

Putting it all together, what are Egypt's claims upon our confidence? Frankly, it seems to me to be virtually impossible that a faithful, high quality transmission of the NT Text could have taken place in Egypt—it simply lacked the necessary qualifications. Besides, we have the proof of the pudding. Each of the early manuscripts that is assigned to the Alexandrian text-type is in itself a poor copy—demonstrably so. Not only that, they disagree among themselves to an astonishing extent. Not to mention the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times they disagree, as a group, with the rest of the world.

Isn't there a better way? Well, where do the three controlling factors point? The Aegean region was the area that was best qualified, from every point of view, to transmit the true Text, from the very first. In Kurt Aland's words, "Even around A.D. 325 . . . Asia Minor continued to be the heartland of the Church" (*The Text*, p. 53). "The heartland of the Church"—who else would be in a better position to certify the correct text of the New Testament? I know of no reason to doubt that the Byzantine text-type is in fact the form of the Text that was known and transmitted in the Aegean area from the beginning. It is the result of the normal, faithful transmission of the NT Text—in every age, including the second

and third centuries, it has been the traditional text. Fortunately, since 1982 it has been available in printed form. I earnestly recommend to all the use of *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*, Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad, eds., Thomas Nelson Publishers, second edition, 1985. [Of course now mention should also be made of R-P and WP; but even back then I should have mentioned the Text of the Orthodox Churches.]