# Classifying Variants

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Having collated at least one book in some 70 MSS, and in the hope that the tribe of collators will increase (since we now know that the Byzantine bulk is composed of dozens of rivulets), I would like to offer the following scale for the classification of variants. I consider that this is a necessary step toward the ranking of exemplars within any given line of transmission, which ranking joins geographic distribution as an important tool for solving serious family splits (for an example of how this works see my "Adjudicating Family Splits").

Scale:

x  =  an uncorrected variant that it is attested by MSS outside the family;

y  =  a split that is not limited to the family;

/  =  a split within the family (no outside attestation);

c  =  a variant belonging to one of the three classifications above that has been corrected to the presumed archetype;

s  =  singular reading / private variant (until all MSS have been collated, this is just an assumption);

ç  =  a private variant that has been corrected to the presumed archetype (often by the first hand);

h  =  an obvious case of homoioteleuton (or –arcton), often involving a line or more, but can be just three or four words;

i  =  sheer inattention.

I will discuss the items in reverse order, positing at the outset that only the top three deserve to be classified as proper 'variants', most of which were presumably created deliberately. (In a separate paper I plan to take up the question of types of intention: was the copyist just trying to make the meaning clearer [e.g. implicit → explicit], or was he changing the meaning, or even the doctrine.) The bottom four are in the nature of inadvertent slips, where there was no intention of altering the text (although some 'singulars' were evidently deliberate)—these will be irrelevant to the defining of a family's profile. Some day the attestation for competing readings should be given in terms of families, not individual MSS (or percentages thereof), as I have already done in the Apocalypse.

I use 'i' most frequently where the copyist either repeated or omitted a letter or syllable going from one line to the next, or one page to the next. The result is usually nonsense. Where a MS indicates a paragraph break or the beginning of a lection with a large letter in the margin, that letter was sometimes first written in normal size and whoever added the large letter (usually in different colored ink) failed to erase the small letter—the flip side of that is that sometimes the large letter was not added, and is therefore missing (however, if working with a copy made from a microfilm, the problem may be in the film—as more and more digital copies become available on the internet, it will be increasingly possible to remove such doubts). Spelling errors of an itacistic type should be classed here, especially when the result is nonsense. This sort of thing should not be classed as a variant reading; it is simply a mistake and should not detain us.

The use of 'h' is usually straightforward when the omission is lengthy. I suspect that not a few omissions involving just one or two words could legitimately be classed in this way, but the choice is less clear; to be on the safe side I usually fall back on 's'. As with 'i', 'h' should not be classed as a proper variant reading; it is just a mistake.

By definition an 's' is irrelevant to identifying the archetypal form. A single MS against all the other family members cannot possibly be right, given a normal process of transmission. Since the transmission was demonstrably normal, a 'singular' should never be contemplated. [Recall that any type of eclectic approach is predicated on the presuppositions that the original wording was lost, and that the transmission was not normal—both of which I affirm to be false.]

The crucial criterion for 'ç' is that the variant being corrected be in fact 'private' (until all MSS have been collated, this is just an assumption, but where the result in nonsense that assumption will most likely be sustained). Since the reading of the archetype has been restored, there is nothing to detain us.

The remaining categories are self-explanatory, but I would like to add an observation about 'splits': not infrequently I say to myself, 'this looks fortuitous', but how to demonstrate it? Where it is possible to delineate a sub-group, the dependency is clear, but if in the whole 'Pauline corpus', for example, a given set of MSS share a minority reading only once, we should presumably conclude that the copyists made the same mistake independently (especially when it is an obvious/easy change), which would then fall in the 's' classification.

For the purpose of ranking the exemplars, I consider that an 'x' is more serious than a 'y', which in turn is more serious than a '/'; and these are the only three categories that I attribute to the exemplar. Any 'x' represents mixture (but it did not affect anyone else in the family) which is why I rank it as the most serious. A 'y' indicates that the contamination had started to spread—it is a combination of mixture and split. A '/' does not involve mixture, since it is limited to the family. Of course, any given variant may not have been in the exemplar, and conversely a copyist may have 'corrected' a variant that was there—at this point we must deal with approximations, but in the big picture such initiatives will tend to cancel each other out.

Permit me to offer a case history. I have myself collated 26 $f^{35}$ MSS for Hebrews. Of the presumed exemplars, fully fourteen have no 'x', which means that they were free of private mixture. Five have one 'x', three have two, two have three, one has four, and the worst has five (for a book the size of Hebrews). Of the 14, I consider that three were perfect, the rest having one or more splits. The mean level is so high that ranking the exemplars becomes difficult—I will be very interested to see a comparison of this showing with that of any other family. It is evident that when copying an $f^{35}$ exemplar the copyists believed that they were handling a sacred Text, and therefore did their work with meticulous care. Von Soden saw something of this and so called his $K^r$ a 'controlled' text. To my devious mind this raises an interesting question: controlled by whom?