

What is a 'controlled' text?

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On page 11* of the English 'Introduction', the editors of the *Editio Critica Maior* of James refer to the Byzantine text (which includes Family 35) as being "carefully controlled". I seem to recall that the use of the term 'controlled' goes back at least to von Soden. Family 35 is by far the largest, and most cohesive (internally consistent), line of transmission within the broad Byzantine river, so if the Byzantine bulk was controlled, Family 35 would be more so.

Now then, if a text is 'controlled', someone has to do the controlling—if there is no controller, there can be no controlling. So who are the possible candidates? I see three possibilities: human beings, Satan, God. So far as I know, all those who refer to the Byzantine text as 'controlled' exclude the supernatural from their model; so for them, the controlling is done by human beings, independent of supernatural influence. Since the alleged control had to operate for more than a millennium, it could not be done by a single individual. But who could control the whole Mediterranean world? For over a thousand years the Roman Church used Latin, not Greek. Was there ever a functioning central authority among the Orthodox Churches? Certainly not for a thousand years, and not for the whole Mediterranean world. So who did the controlling?

Not only that, but the supposed controlling was evidently rather lax, since the MSS are full of random mistakes, quite apart from shared dependencies. Consider the conclusion reached by F. Wisse after he collated and analyzed 1,386 Greek MSS containing chapters 1, 10 and 20 of Luke (three complete chapters). He described 37 lines of transmission, plus 89 "mavericks", MSS so individually disparate that they could not be grouped. Of the 37 groups, 36 fall within the broad Byzantine river, and within them Wisse described 70 subgroups. So what kind of 'control' could permit such a situation? I trust that my readers will not think me unreasonable when I say that in the face of such concrete evidence I find the thesis of a 'controlled' Byzantine text (excluding the supernatural) to be less than convincing. But then, how shall we account for the comparative uniformity found within it?

I hope that my readers are aware that I personally insist that the supernatural should be included in any model of NT textual criticism. Both God and Satan certainly exist, and both have an ongoing interest in the fortunes of the NT Text. For some time I have been defending the divine preservation of the NT Text in concrete terms. Curiously, those who allege a controlled Byzantine text usually reject any notion of divine preservation. But of course, if they do not believe in divine inspiration, they will not believe in preservation. Someone who denies the existence of a Sovereign Creator will logically insist that a nonexistent being cannot do anything. But how then can such a person explain the Byzantine text? I submit that no naturalistic hypothesis can account for Family 35.

Satan would certainly do nothing to help preserve the NT Text; any involvement of his would be with a view to pervert the text, thereby undermining its authority. (I would say that he concentrated his efforts in Egypt.) I have argued elsewhere that the transmission of the NT Text was predominately 'normal', and that normality was defined by the Christian Church. Why were copies made? Because the congregations needed them. Why did the congregations 'need' them? Because they understood that the NT writings were divinely inspired, and they were read and discussed in their weekly meetings. To argue that the early Christians were mistaken in that understanding would be beside the point. That understanding (mistaken or not) determined their attitude toward the NT writings, which controlled their production of copies. If the majority of persons producing copies was made up of sincere (more or less) Christians, they would do their work with reasonable care (some more, some less). Those who held a strong view of inspiration would be especially careful.

I submit that the surviving MSS reflect my description above. Family 35, by far the largest and most cohesive group (perhaps the only group that exists in all 27 books), represents the core of the transmission, its representatives having been produced by copyists with a high view of inspiration (as evidenced by the extreme care in their work). Outside that core are a large number of tangents, or rivulets, that diverge from the core in varying degrees, and that began at different times and places. A monk who was merely carrying out a religious obligation would produce a 'run of the mill' Byzantine copy; good enough for virtually all practical purposes, but not up to the \mathfrak{f}^{35} standard.

So was the Byzantine text 'controlled'? Obviously not in any strict sense. The control was exercised by a common belief (within the Christian community) that the NT was divinely inspired. It was that belief that dictated the proliferation of copies made with reasonable care. That reasonable care is reflected in the basic uniformity within the Byzantine bulk. But to explain the incredibly careful transmission reflected in the \mathfrak{f}^{35} representatives, requires something more.

Of \mathfrak{f}^{35} MSS that I myself have collated, I hold perfect copies of the family archetype (empirically determined) as follows: 29 for Philemon, 15 for 2 Thessalonians, 9 for Titus, 6 for Galatians, 4 for Ephesians, and at least one for 22 of the 27 NT books (and many more are off by a single letter!). These are MSS from all over the Mediterranean world, and representing five centuries. So what kind of control could produce such an incredible level of perfection—a control exercised in isolated monasteries scattered around the Mediterranean world and during five centuries? We know of no human agency that could do it. If the agency was not human, then it had to be divine. Is Family 35 a controlled text? Yes. By whom? The Holy Spirit.