

Preserved Text-v9. Was the Transmission Normal?

Here I am again in the name of the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord Jesus Christ. Continuing with the historical evidence for Preservation, I will discuss the question: was the transmission normal?

Beginning with Saul of Tarsus, Christians were persecuted here and there throughout the Roman Empire until Constantine started relief in AD 312. The persecutions included the sporadic destruction of copies of the NT, in whole or in part, here and there. But in AD 303 Diocletian decreed the most severe persecution that Christianity had experienced, up to that point. It included the burning of the sacred books; they were to be destroyed, wherever found. Although the persecution was Empire-wide, it was especially severe in Asia Minor, where Christianity was the strongest, and it continued for at least ten years.

Many MSS were found, or betrayed, and burned, but others must have escaped. That many Christians would have spared no effort to hide and preserve their copies of the Scriptures is demonstrated by their attitude towards those who gave up their MSS—the Donatist schism that immediately followed Diocletian's campaign partly hinged on the question of punishment for those who had given up MSS. The Christians whose entire devotion to the Scriptures was thus demonstrated would also be just the ones that would be the most careful about the pedigree of their own MSS; just as they took pains to protect their MSS they presumably would have taken pains to ensure that their MSS preserved the true wording.

In fact, the campaign of Diocletian may even have had a purifying effect upon the transmission of the text. If the laxity of attitude toward the text reflected in the willingness of some to give up their MSS also extended to the quality of text they were prepared to use, then it may have been the more contaminated MSS that were destroyed, in the main, leaving the purer MSS to replenish the earth. But these surviving pure MSS would have been in unusually heavy demand for copying (to replace those that had been destroyed) and been worn out faster than normal. [In passing we may note that here was an excellent opportunity for the "Alexandrian" and "Western" texts to forge ahead and take 'space' away from the "Byzantine", but it did not happen. The Church rejected those types of text. How can modern critics possibly be in a better position to identify the true text than was the Church universal in the early 4th century?]

But to return to our question: Was the transmission normal? Yes and no. Assuming the faithful were persons of at least average integrity and

intelligence they would produce reasonable 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. But there were others who expressed an interest in the New Testament writings, persons lacking in integrity, who made their own copies with malicious intent. There would be accidental mistakes in their work too, but also deliberate alteration of the text. I will trace first the normal transmission.

The normal transmission

We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the New Testament writings from the start—had they not they would have been rejecting the authority of the Apostles, and hence not been among the faithful. 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.

With an ever-increasing demand and consequent proliferation of copies throughout the Greco-Roman world and with the potential for verifying copies by having recourse to the centers still possessing the Autographs, the early textual situation was presumably highly favorable to the wide dissemination of MSS in close agreement with the original text. By the early years of the second century the dissemination of such copies can reasonably be expected to have been very widespread, with the logical consequence that the form of text they embodied would early become entrenched throughout the area of their influence.

The considerations just cited are crucial to an adequate understanding of the history of the transmission of the text because they indicate that a basic trend was established at the very beginning—a trend that would continue inexorably until the advent of a printed N.T. text. I say "inexorably" because, given a normal process of transmission, the science of statistical probability demonstrates that a text form in such circumstances could scarcely be dislodged from its dominant position—the probabilities against a competing text form ever achieving a majority attestation would be prohibitive no matter how many generations of MSS there might be.¹ It would take an extraordinary upheaval in the transmissional history to give currency to an aberrant text form. We know of no place in history that will accommodate such an upheaval.

¹ The demonstration vindicating my assertion is in Appendix C of my book, *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV*, available from Amazon.com as well as from my site, www.prunch.org.

The argument from probability would apply to secular writings as well as the New Testament and does not take into account any unusual concern for purity of text. I have argued, however, that the early Christians did have a special concern for their Scriptures and that this concern accompanied the spread of Christianity. Thus Irenaeus clearly took his concern for textual purity (which extended to a single letter) to Gaul and undoubtedly influenced the Christians in that area. The point is that the text form of the NT Autographs had a big advantage over that of any secular literature, so that its commanding position would become even greater than the argument from probability would suggest, and all the more so if the Autographs were 'published' as multiple copies. The rapid multiplication and spread of good copies would raise to absolutely prohibitive levels the chances against an opportunity for aberrant text forms to gain any kind of widespread acceptance or use.¹

It follows that within a relatively few years after the writing of the NT books there came rapidly into existence a 'Majority' text whose form was essentially that of the Autographs themselves. This text form would, in the natural course of things, continue to multiply itself and in each succeeding generation of copying would continue to be exhibited in the mass of extant manuscripts. In short, it would have a 'normal' transmission. The law of supply and demand operates within the Church, as well as elsewhere. True believers would be far more interested in obtaining copies of the NT writings than people who were not. Opponents of Christianity, who might attempt to confuse the issue by producing altered copies, would have a much smaller 'market' for their work.

The use of such designations as "Syrian", "Antiochian", and "Byzantine" for the Majority Text reflects its general association with that region. I know of no reason to doubt that the "Byzantine" text is in fact the form of the text that was known and transmitted in the Aegean area from the beginning.

In sum, I believe that the evidence clearly favors that interpretation of the history of the text which sees the normal transmission of the text as centered in the Aegean region, the area that was best qualified, from every point of view, to transmit the text, from the very first. The result of that normal

¹ I have avoided introducing any argument based on the providence of God, up to this point, because not all accept such argumentation and because the superiority of the Byzantine Text can be demonstrated without recourse to it. Thus, I believe the argument from statistical probability given above is valid as it stands. However, while I have not argued on the basis of Providence, I wish the reader to understand that I personally do not think that the preservation of the true text was so mechanistic as the discussion above might suggest. From the evidence previously adduced, it seems clear that a great many variant readings (perhaps most of the malicious ones) that existed in the second century simply have not survived—we have no extant witness to them. We may reasonably conclude that the early Christians were concerned and able watchdogs of the true text. I would like to believe that they were aided and abetted by the Holy Spirit. In that event, the security of the text is considerably greater than that suggested by probability alone, including the proposition that none of the original wording has been lost.

transmission is the "Byzantine" text-type. In every age, including the second and third centuries, it has been the traditional text.¹

So then, I claim that the NT text had a normal transmission, namely the fully predictable spread and reproduction of reliable copies of the Autographs from the earliest period down through the history of transmission until the availability of printed texts brought copying by hand to an end.

The abnormal transmission²

Turning now to the abnormal transmission, it no doubt commenced right along with the normal. The apostolic writings themselves contain strong complaints and warning against heretical and malicious activity. 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 leaders who wrote during the second century complained bitterly about the deliberate alterations to the Text perpetrated by 'heretics'. Large sections of the extant writings of the early leaders are precisely and exclusively concerned with combating the heretics. It is clear that during the second century, and possibly already in the first, such persons produced many copies of NT writings incorporating their alterations.³ Some apparently were quite widely circulated, for a time. The result was a welter of variant readings, to confuse the uninformed and mislead the unwary. 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.

¹ Within the broad Byzantine stream there are dozens of rivulets (recall that F. Wisse isolated 36 groups, which included 70 subgroups), but the largest distinct line of transmission is Family 35, the main stream, and it was specifically this family that God used to preserve the precise original wording. For more on this please see Part II.

² I have been accused of inconsistency in that I criticize W-H for treating the NT like any other book and yet myself claim a "normal transmission" for the Majority Text. Not at all; I am referring to a normal transmission of an inspired Text, which W-H denied. I refer to believers copying a text that **they** believed to be inspired. Further, I also recognize an 'abnormal transmission', whereas W-H did not. Fee seriously distorts my position by ignoring my discussion of the abnormal transmission (G.D. Fee, "A Critique of W.N. Pickering's *The Identity of the New testament Text: A Review Article*", *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI [Spring, 1979], pp. 404-08) and misstating my view of the normal transmission (*Ibid.*, p. 399). I hold that 95% of the variants, the obvious transcriptional errors, belong (for the most part) to the normal transmission, whereas most of the remaining 5%, the 'significant' variants, belong to the abnormal transmission.

³ J.W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (London: John Murray, 1883), pp. 323-24.

Most damage done by 200 AD

It is generally agreed that most significant variants existed by the end of the second century. "The overwhelming majority of readings were created before the year 200", affirmed Colwell.¹ "It is no less true to fact than paradoxical in sound that the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within a hundred years after it was composed", said Scrivener decades before.² Kilpatrick commented on the evidence of the earliest Papyri.

Let us take our two manuscripts of about this date [AD 200] which contain parts of John, the Chester Beatty Papyrus and the Bodmer Papyrus. They are together extant for about seventy verses. Over these seventy verses they differ some seventy-three times apart from mistakes.

Further in the Bodmer Papyrus the original scribe has frequently corrected what he first wrote. At some places he is correcting his own mistakes but at others he substitutes one form of phrasing for another. At about seventy-five of these substitutions both alternatives are known from other manuscripts independently. The scribe is in fact replacing one variant reading by another at some seventy places so that we may conclude that already in his day there was variation at these points.³

The Bodmer papyrus is P⁶⁶, and what Kilpatrick does not tell you is that in those 75 places the scribe was alternating between Byzantine and Alexandrian readings: sometimes he started with a Byzantine reading and then changed it to an Alexandrian and sometimes he did the opposite. He obviously had such exemplars before him, which means that the Byzantine Text was already in existence in the year 200!

G. Zuntz also recognized the early origin of variants. "Modern criticism stops before the barrier of the second century; the age, so it seems, of unbounded liberties with the text".⁴

¹ E.C. Colwell, "The Origin of Texttypes of New Testament Manuscripts", *Early Christian Origins*, ed. Allen Wikgren (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p. 138.

² F.H.A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, fourth edition edited by E. Miller (2 Vols.; London: George Bell and Sons, 1894), II, 264.

³ G.D. Kilpatrick, "The Transmission of the New Testament and its Reliability", *The Bible Translator*, IX (July, 1958), 128-29.

⁴ G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 11.

Kilpatrick goes on to argue that the creation of new variants ceased by about 200 AD because it became impossible to 'sell' them. He discusses some of Origen's attempts at introducing a change into the text, and proceeds:

Origen's treatment of Matthew 19:19 is significant in two other ways. First he was probably the most influential commentator of the Ancient Church and yet his conjecture at this point seems to have influenced only one manuscript of a local version of the New Testament. The Greek tradition is apparently quite unaffected by it. From the third century onward even an Origen could not effectively alter the text.

This brings us to the second significant point—his date. From the early third century onward the freedom to alter the text which had obtained earlier can no longer be practiced. Tatian is the last author to make deliberate changes in the text of whom we have explicit information. Between Tatian and Origen Christian opinion had so changed that it was no longer possible to make changes in the text whether they were harmless or not.¹

He feels this attitude was a reaction against the re-handling of the text by the second-century heretics. Certainly there had been a great hue and cry, and whatever the reason it does appear that little further damage was done after AD 200. [I believe we may reasonably understand that significant variants that first appear at a later date, within extant MSS, had actually been created much earlier.] However, I certainly disagree with Kilpatrick's "freedom to alter the text which had obtained earlier"; there was no such 'freedom', it was the perversity of enemies of the Truth.

The aberrant text forms

The extent of the textual difficulties of the 2nd century can easily be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the evidence cited does prove that aberrant forms of the NT text were produced. Naturally, some of those text forms may have acquired a local and temporary currency, but they could scarcely become more than eddies along the edge of the 'majority' river. Recall that the possibility of checking against the Autographs, or guaranteed copies, must have served to inhibit the spread of such text forms.

For example, Gaius, an orthodox Father who wrote near the end of the second century, named four heretics who not only altered the text but had disciples who multiplied copies of their efforts. Of special interest here is his charge

¹ Kilpatrick, "Atticism and the Text of the Greek New Testament", *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1963), pp. 129-30.

that they could not deny their guilt because they could not produce the originals from which they made their copies.¹ This would be a hollow accusation from Gaius if he could not produce the Originals either. I have already argued that the churches in Asia Minor, for instance, did still have either the Autographs or exact copies that they themselves had made—thus they **knew**, absolutely, what the true wording was and could repel the aberrant forms with confidence. A man like Polycarp would still be able to affirm in 150 AD, letter by letter if need be, the original wording of the text for most of the New Testament books. And presumably his MSS were not burned when he was.

Not only would there have been pressure from the Autographs, but also the pressure exerted by the already-established momentum of transmission enjoyed by the majority text form. As already discussed, the statistical probabilities militating against any aberrant text forms would be overwhelming. In short, although a bewildering array of variants came into existence, judging from extant witnesses, and they were indeed a perturbing influence in the stream of transmission, they would not succeed in thwarting the progress of the normal transmission.

¹ Cf. Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, p. 323.