

Who was best qualified?

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What follows has been copied from my book, *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (first published in 1977), with some additions. Anyone wishing to check the references should consult that book.

What factors would be important for guaranteeing, or at least facilitating, a faithful transmission of the text of the N.T. writings? I submit that there are four controlling factors: access to the Autographs, proficiency in the source language, the strength of the Church and an appropriate attitude toward the Text.

Access to the Autographs

This criterion probably applied for well 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, or a guaranteed copy, 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.

So 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 the 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—the text in Egypt could only be second hand, at best. On the face of it, we may reasonably assume that in the earliest period of the transmission of the N.T. Text the most reliable copies would be circulating in the region that held the Autographs. Recalling the discussion of Tertullian above, I believe we may reasonably extend this conclusion to A.D. 200 and beyond. So, in the year 200 someone looking for the best text of the N.T. would presumably go to the Aegean area; certainly not to Egypt.¹

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—the semantic areas of the words simply do not match, or only in part.) 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 N.T.). 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 (try it and see!). 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 N.T. Text in the early centuries.) But if you cannot understand the text it is very difficult to remain alert. Consider the case of P⁶⁶. This papyrus manuscript is perhaps the oldest (c. 200) extant N.T. manuscript of any size (it contains most of John). It is one of the worst copies we have. It has an average of roughly two mistakes per verse—many being obvious mistakes, stupid mistakes, nonsensical mistakes. From the pattern of mistakes it is clear that the scribe copied syllable by syllable. I have no qualms in affirming that the person who produced P⁶⁶ did not know Greek. Had he understood the text he would not have made the number and sort of mistakes that he did. (So far as we know, P⁶⁶ was produced in Egypt, so it is not surprising that it is a bad copy.)

¹ Aland states: "Egypt was distinguished from other provinces of the Church, so far as we can judge, by the early dominance of gnosticism". He further informs us that "at the close of the 2nd 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". 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**. (K. and B. Aland, p. 59 and K. Aland, "The Text of the Church?", *Trinity Journal*, 1987, 8NS:138.)

Now consider the problem from God's point of view. To whom should He entrust the primary responsibility for the faithful transmission of the N.T. Text (recall 1 Chronicles 16:15)? If the Holy Spirit was 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. So where was Greek predominant? Evidently in Greece and Asia Minor; Greek is the mother tongue of Greece to this day (having changed considerably during the intervening centuries, as any living language must). The dominance of Greek in the Aegean area was guaranteed by the Byzantine Empire for many centuries; in fact, until the invention of printing. Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453; the Gutenberg Bible (Latin) was printed just three years later, while the first printed Greek New Testament appeared in 1516. (For those who believe in Providence, I would suggest that here we have a powerful case in point.)

How about Egypt? 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".² By the third century the decline was evidently well advanced. I have already argued that the copyist who did P⁶⁶ (c. 200) did not know Greek. Now consider the case of P⁷⁵ (c. 220). E.C. Colwell analyzed P⁷⁵ 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 P⁷⁵ copied letter by letter!³ 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. K. 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.⁴ This means that by 250 Egypt was no longer competent to transmit the NT, so anything produced in Egypt after that date should not be trusted.

Again the Aegean Area is far and away the best qualified to transmit the Text with confidence and integrity. Note that even if Egypt had started out with a good text, already by the end of the 2nd century its competence to transmit the text was steadily deteriorating. In fact, the early papyri (they come from Egypt) are demonstrably inferior in quality, taken individually, as well as exhibiting rather different types of text (they disagree among themselves).

² Metzger, *Early Versions*, p. 104.

³ Colwell, "Scribal Habits", pp. 374-76, 380.

⁴ K. and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 52-53.

The strength of the Church

This question is relevant to our discussion for two reasons. First, the law of supply and demand operates in the Church as well as elsewhere. Where there are many congregations and believers there will be an increased demand for copies of the Scriptures. Second, a strong, well established church will normally have a confident, experienced leadership—just the sort that would take an interest in the quality of their Scriptures and also be able to do something about it. So in what areas was the early Church strongest?

Although the Church evidently began in Jerusalem, the early persecutions and apostolic activity caused it to spread. 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". He continues: "The overall impression is that the concentration of Christianity was in the East. . . . Even around A.D. 325 the scene was still largely unchanged. Asia Minor continued to be the heartland of the Church."⁵ "The heartland of the Church"—so who else would be in a better position to certify the correct text of the New Testament?

What about Egypt? 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.⁶ Aland states: "Egypt was distinguished from other provinces of the Church, so far as we can judge, by the early dominance of gnosticism."⁷ He further informs us that "at the close of the 2nd 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".⁸ 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

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ Roberts, pp. 42-43, 54-58.

⁷ K. and B. Aland, p. 59.

⁸ K. Aland, "The Text of the Church?", *Trinity Journal*, 1987, 8NS:138.

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 Eutychites. What proportion of Christians in Egypt during the second century were orthodox is not known.⁹

Dear me, it is almost enough to make one wonder whether Isaiah 30:1-3 might not be a prophecy about N.T. textual criticism!

But we need to pause to reflect on the implications of Aland's statements. He was a champion of the Egyptian ('Alexandrian') text-type, and yet he himself informs us that up to A.D. 200 the textual tradition in Egypt could not be trusted and that by 200 the use of Greek had virtually died out there. So on what basis can he argue that the Egyptian text subsequently became the best? Please, consider: Aland declared that in 200 the Christian church in Egypt was dead in the water, and their NT MSS could not be trusted. And after 200 the situation there just kept getting worse. It follows that any MSS coming from Egypt have absolutely no claim upon our confidence. Egypt was always unqualified to transmit the NT Text.

Aland also states that in the 2nd century, 3rd century, and into the 4th century Asia Minor continued to be "the heartland of the Church". This means that the superior qualifications of the Aegean area to protect, transmit and attest the N.T. Text carry over into the 4th century! It happens that Hort, Metzger and Aland (along with many others) have linked the Byzantine text-type to Lucian of Antioch, who died in 311. Now really, would not a text produced by a leader in "the heartland of the Church" be better than whatever evolved in Egypt? Of course I ask the above question only to point out their inconsistency. The Byzantine text-type existed long before Lucian.

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 N.T. books we may begin with the question: "Why would copies be made?"

We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the N.T. 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

⁹ Metzger, *Early Versions*, p. 101.

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 1st century makes clear that copies were in circulation. A Pauline corpus was known to Peter before A.D. 70. 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—this especially in the early decades.¹⁰

As time went on regional attitudes developed, not to mention regional politics. The rise of the so-called 'school of Antioch' is a relevant consideration. Beginning with Theophilus, a bishop of Antioch who died around 185, the Antiochians began insisting upon the literal interpretation of Scripture. The point is that a literalist is obliged to be concerned about the precise wording of the text since his interpretation or exegesis hinges upon it.

It is reasonable to assume that this 'literalist' mentality would have influenced the churches of Asia Minor and Greece and encouraged them in the careful and faithful transmission of the pure text that they had received. For example, the hundreds of MSS of the Syriac Peshitta are unparalleled for their consistency. (By way of contrast, the 8,000+ MSS of the Latin Vulgate are remarkable for their extensive

¹⁰ Having myself collated at least one book in over 100 MSS belonging to the line of transmission that I call Family 35, I have a perfect copy of the family archetype, empirically determined, for at least 22 of the 27 NT books, copies made in the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. For a copy to be perfect in the 15th century, all of its 'ancestors' had to be perfect, all the way back to the family archetype. I believe that the archetype of Family 35 is the Autograph, but if not, it must date back to the 3rd century, at least.

discrepancies, and in this they follow the example of the Old Latin MSS.) It is not unreasonable to suppose that the Antiochian antipathy toward the Alexandrian allegorical interpretation of Scripture would rather indispose them to view with favor any competing forms of the text coming out of Egypt. Similarly the Quarto-deciman controversy with Rome would scarcely enhance the appeal of any innovations coming from the West. However, knowing that they had the true Text, they would reject corruptions from whatever source.

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 O.T. began to rub off on the young church already in the first century. 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.

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."¹ 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.

Conclusion

What answer do the "four controlling factors" give to our question? The four speak with united voice: "The Aegean area was the best qualified to protect, transmit and attest the true text of the N.T. writings, from the very first." This was true in the 2nd century; it was true in the 3rd century; it continued to be true in the 4th century. And it continued to be true in succeeding centuries; surely, because Egypt no longer used Greek, and neither did Rome. It was the Greek speaking local congregations and monastic communities that continued to provide the demand for copies.

¹ W.R. Farmer, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1974), pp. 14-15. He cites B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 1924, pp. 111, 122-23.