

Why there are no early Byzantine MSS

Wilbur N. Pickering, ThM PhD

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.

Why would or should there be? To demand that a MS survive for 1,500 years is in effect to require both that it have remained unused and that it have been stored in Egypt (or Qumran). Even an unused MS would require an arid climate to last so long.

But is either requirement reasonable? Unless there were persons so rich as to be able to proliferate copies of the Scriptures for their health or amusement, copies would be made on demand, in order to be **used**. As the use of Greek died out in Egypt the demand for Greek Scriptures would die out too, so we should not expect to find many Greek MSS in Egypt. (Actually, how many Greek speaking communities existed in Egypt at any time?)

It should not be assumed, however, that the Byzantine text was not used in Egypt. Although none of the early Papyri can reasonably be called Byzantine, they each contain Byzantine readings. The case of P⁶⁶ is dramatic. The first hand was extensively corrected, and both hands are dated around A.D. 200. The 1st hand is almost half Byzantine (a. 47%), but the 2nd hand regularly changed Byzantine readings to 'Alexandrian' and *vice versa*, i.e. he changed 'Alexandrian' to Byzantine, repeatedly. This means that they must have had two exemplars, one 'Alexandrian' and one Byzantine—between the two hands the Byzantine text receives considerable attestation (in the year 200!!).

Consider the case of Codex B and P⁷⁵; they are said to agree 82% of the time (unprecedented for 'Alexandrian' MSS, but rather poor for Byzantine). But what about the 18% discrepancy? Most of the time, if not always, when P⁷⁵ and B disagree one or the other agrees with the Byzantine reading, and the distribution is about even. If they come from a common source, that source would have been more Byzantine than either descendant. Even the Coptic versions agree with the Byzantine text as often as not.

"Orphan children"

The study and conclusions of Lake, Blake, and New, already discussed in a prior section, are of special interest here. They looked for evidence of direct genealogy and found virtually none. I repeat their conclusion.

. . . the manuscripts which we have are almost all orphan children without brothers or sisters.

Taking this fact into consideration along with the negative result of our collation of MSS at Sinai, Patmos, and Jerusalem, it is hard to resist the

conclusion that the scribes usually destroyed their exemplars when they had copied the sacred books.¹

Is it unreasonable to suppose that once an old MS became tattered and almost illegible in spots the faithful would make an exact copy of it and then destroy it, rather than allowing it to suffer the indignity of literally rotting away? What would such a practice do to our chances of finding an early Byzantine MS? Anyone who objects to this conclusion must still account for the fact that in three ancient monastic libraries equipped with scriptoria (rooms designed to facilitate the faithful copying of MSS), there are only "orphan children". Why are there no parents?!

Van Bruggen addresses the problem from a slightly different direction. He says of the Byzantine text:

The fact that this text-form is known to us via later manuscripts is as such no proof for a late text-type, but it does seem to become a proof when at the same time a different text is found in all older manuscripts. The combination of these two things seems to offer decisive proof for the late origin of the traditional text.²

He answers the "seeming proof" in the following way:

Let us make ourselves aware of **what** we have presupposed with this seemingly convincing argumentation. What conditions must be satisfied if

¹ Lake, Blake and New, p. 349. D.A. Carson offers the following response to this suggestion: "The answers to this ingenious theory are obvious: (1) If only one copy were made before the exemplar was destroyed, there would never be more than one extant copy of the Greek New Testament! (2) If several copies were made from one exemplar, then either (a) they were not all made at the same time, and therefore the destruction of the exemplar was not a common practice after all; or (b) they were all made at the same time. (3) If the latter obtains, then it should be possible to identify their sibling relationship; yet in fact such identification is as difficult and as precarious as the identification of direct exemplar/copy manuscripts. This probably means we have lost a lot of manuscripts; and/or it means that the divergences between copy and exemplar, as between copy and sibling copy, are frequently difficult to detect. (4) Why are there **no** copies of the Byzantine text before about A.D. 350, and **so many** [emphasis Carson's] from there on? This anomaly, it might be argued, demonstrates that the practice of destroying the exemplar died out during the fourth century" (*The King James Version Debate*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979, pp. 47-48).

Perhaps it is fortunate that Lake is no longer available for comment upon this extraordinary statement. If I may presume to answer for him, it seems to me apparent that what Lake found was the end of the line, the last generation of copies. Neither Lake nor anyone else has suggested that only one copy would be made of any exemplar, but after a life of use and being copied a worn and tattered MS would be destroyed. Carson's point (4) is hard to believe. Lake, Blake, and New were looking at minuscule MSS, probably none earlier than the tenth century—they had to be copied from something, and it is a fact that Lake and company found no 'parents'. Carson offers no explanation for this *fact*. And what are we to understand from his strange remark about Byzantine MSS before and after A.D. 350? There are none from the fourth century, unless W (Matthew) be placed there, two partially so from the fifth, and a slowly expanding stream as one moves up through the succeeding centuries. It is only when we come to the minuscule era that we find "so many". Please see the next section, "the ninth century transliteration process", to find out why.

² Van Bruggen, p. 24.

we wish to award the prize to the older majuscules? While asking this question we assumed wittingly or unwittingly that we were capable of making a fair comparison between manuscripts in an earlier period and those in a later period. After all, we can only arrive at positive statements if that is the case. Imagine that someone said: in the Middle Ages mainly cathedrals were built, but in modern times many small and plainer churches are being built. This statement seems completely true when we today look around in the cities and villages. Yet we are mistaken. An understandable mistake: many small churches of the Middle Ages have disappeared, and usually only the cathedrals were restored. Thus, a great historical falsification of perspective with regard to the history of church-building arises. We are not able to make a general assertion about church-building in the Middle Ages on the basis of the surviving materials. If we would still dare to make such an assertion, then we wrongly assumed that the surviving materials enabled us to make a fair comparison. But how is the situation in the field of New Testament manuscripts? Do we have a **representative** number of manuscripts from the first centuries? Only if that is the case, do we have the right to make conclusions and positive statements. Yet it is just at this point that difficulties arise. The situation is even such that we know with certainty that we **do not** possess a representative number of manuscripts from the first centuries.³

The conclusion of Lake, Blake, and New reflects another consideration. The age of a manuscript must not be confused with the age of the text it exhibits. Any copy, by definition, contains a text that is older than it is! In Burgon's words, it "represents a MS, or a pedigree of MSS, older than itself; and it is but fair to suppose that it exercises such representation with tolerable accuracy".⁴

The ninth century transliteration process

Van Bruggen discusses yet another relevant consideration.

In the codicology the great value of the transliteration process in the 9th century and thereafter is recognized. At that time the most important New Testament manuscripts written in majuscule script were carefully transcribed into minuscule script. It is assumed that after this transliteration-process the majuscule was taken out of circulation. . . . The import of this datum has not been taken into account enough in the present New Testament textual criticism. For it implies, that just the oldest, best and most customary manuscripts come to us in the new uniform of the minuscule script, does it not? This is even more cogent since it appears that various archetypes can be detected in this

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴ Burgon, *The Traditional Text*, p. 47.

transliteration-process for the New Testament. Therefore we do not receive one mother-manuscript through the flood-gates of the transliteration, but several. The originals have, however, disappeared! This throws a totally different light on the situation that we are confronted with regarding the manuscripts. Why do the surviving ancient manuscripts show another text-type? Because they are the only survivors of their generation, and because their survival is due to the fact that they were of a different kind. Even though one continues to maintain that the copyists at the time of the transliteration handed down the wrong text-type to the Middle Ages, one can still never prove this codicologically with the remark that older majuscules have a different text. This would be circular reasoning. There certainly were majuscules just as venerable and ancient as the surviving Vaticanus or Sinaiticus, which, like a section of the Alexandrinus, presented a Byzantine text. But they have been renewed into minuscule script and their majuscule appearance has vanished. Historically it **seems** as though the most ancient majuscule manuscripts exclusively contain a non-Byzantine text, but the prespective [sic] is falsified here just like it is regarding church-building in the Middle Ages and at present.⁵

The significance of the transliteration process was explained by A. Dain as follows: "The transliterated copy, carefully written and securely bound, became the reference point for the subsequent tradition. The old papyrus and parchment exemplars that had been copied, doubtless quite worn out, were of no further interest and were usually discarded or destroyed."⁶ Apparently there was an organized movement to 'transliterate' uncial MSS into minuscule form or script. Note that Dain agrees with Lake that the "worn out" exemplars were then destroyed (some may have been 'recycled', becoming palimpsests). What if those exemplars were ancient Byzantine uncials? Come to think of it, they must have been, since the cursives are Byzantine.⁷ (If the 'son' is Byzantine, it is because his 'father' was Byzantine.)

Yes indeed, let us stop and think. To copy a document by hand takes time (and skill) and parchment was hard to come by. If a monastery had only the parchment made

⁵ Van Bruggen, pp. 26-27.

⁶ A. Dain, *Les Manuscrits* (Paris, 1949), p. 115.

⁷ Over sixty years ago, E.C. Colwell claimed only eight cursives for the 'Alexandrian' text-type: 33, 157, 517, 579, 892, 1241, 1342 and 2427. In his effort to define a 'mean' Alexandrian text for the first chapter of Mark, he felt obliged to discard five of them as being impossibly different. He then constructed his 'mean' text using uncials κ , B and L, and cursives 33, 892 and 2427. Just in one chapter, 2427 differed from that 'mean' 32 times, 33 differed 33 times and 892 differed 41 times—so on what basis can they be called 'Alexandrian'? (κ differed 26 times from that 'mean' and B, 34 times!) Considering that we have some 2,000 MSS (including fragments) that contain the Gospels, just eight dubious cursive representatives of the so-called 'Alexandrian' text-type makes a rather pitiful showing.

from the skins of the animals they ate, the material would always be in short supply. To buy it from others would take money, and where did a monastery get money? So who is going to waste good parchment making a copy of a text considered to be deficient? Yet they might hesitate to destroy it, so it survived, but left no 'children'. Consider the ninth century uncials that we know of: almost all of them are clearly Byzantine, but not super-good, and none belong to Family 35. I would say that they were not considered to be good enough to deserve putting into minuscule form, and thus survived—had they been 'transliterated' they would have been scraped and turned into a palimpsest.

C.H. Roberts comments upon a practice of early Christians that would have had a similar effect.

It was a Jewish habit both to preserve manuscripts by placing them in jars . . . and also to dispose of defective, worn-out, or heretical scriptures by burying them near a cemetery, not to preserve them but because anything that might contain the name of God might not be destroyed. . . . It certainly looks as if this institution of a morgue for sacred but unwanted manuscripts was taken over from Judaism by the early Church.⁸

Note that the effect of this practice in any but an arid climate would be the decomposition of the MSS. If Byzantine exemplars, worn out through use, were disposed of in this way (as seems likely), they would certainly perish. All of this reduces our chances of finding really ancient Byzantine MSS. Nor is that all.

Imperial repression of the N.T.

There is a further consideration. "It is historically certain that the text of the New Testament endured a very hard time in the first centuries. Many good and official editions of the text were confiscated and destroyed by the authorities during the time of the persecutions."⁹

Roberts refers to "the regular requisition and destruction of books by the authorities at times of persecution, so often recorded in the martyr acts".¹⁰ Such official activity seems to have come to a climax in Diocletian's campaign to destroy the New Testament manuscripts around A.D. 300.

If there was any trauma in the history of the normal transmission of the text, this was it; the more so since the campaign evidently centered upon the Aegean area. 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

⁸ C.H. Roberts, p. 7.

⁹ Van Bruggen, p. 29. Cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VIII, II, 1.4 and F.H.A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction*, pp. 265-66.

¹⁰ Roberts, p. 8.

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.¹¹ 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 short, if the history of transmission presented herein is valid we should not necessarily expect to find any early Byzantine MSS. They would have been used and worn out. (But the text they contained would be preserved by their descendants.) An analogy is furnished by the fate of the *Biblia Pauperum* in the fifteenth century.

The *Biblia Pauperum*

Of all the *Xylographic* works, that is, such as are printed from wooden blocks, the *BIBLIA PAUPERUM* is perhaps the rarest, as well as the most ancient; it is a manual, or kind of catechism of the Bible, for the use of young persons, and of the common people, whence it derives its name,—*Biblia Pauperum—the Bible of the Poor*; who were thus enabled to acquire, at a comparatively low price, an imperfect knowledge of some of the events recorded in the Scriptures. Being much in use, the few copies of it which are at present to be found in the libraries of the curious are for the most part either mutilated or in bad condition. The extreme rarity of this book, and the circumstances under which it was produced, concur to impart a high degree of interest to it.¹²

Although it went through five editions, presumably totaling thousands of copies, it was so popular that the copies were worn out by use. I maintain that the same thing happened to the ancient Byzantine MSS. Adding to all this the discussion of

¹¹ 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?

¹² T.H. Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, 4th American edition (4 vols.; Philadelphia: E. Little, 1831), vol. II, p. 217. I am indebted to Maurice Robinson for calling this material to my attention.

the quality of the earliest MSS, in the prior section, early age in a MS might well arouse our suspicions—why did it survive?

Conclusion

The only surviving ‘edifices’ in Egypt that are 4,000 years old are the pyramids. Will anyone be so ridiculous as to argue that a pyramid was the only type of structure used in Egypt at that time? How many Egyptians at that time lived in pyramids? Absolutely none, because pyramids were only for the dead. But did ordinary people get a pyramid for a tomb? Only a pharaoh could afford one. We can say with total certainty that pyramids are not representative of the totality of structures in Egypt 4,000 years ago, even though they are the only ones that have survived. I would say that it is equally certain that the earliest MSS are not representative of the manuscript situation at the time. (They are the resting place of ‘dead’ forms of the NT Text, much like the pyramids.)

I do not know even the name of any of my great, great grandfathers, and I have no artifacts that they used. Yet I can state with total certainty that they existed. How can I do that? I can do that because I am here, because I exist. I could not exist without great, great grandfathers. My body contains some of their genes, their DNA. Just because I did not exist 400 years ago, does not mean that none of my ancestors did. Is that not perfectly obvious?

Strange to relate, the very INTF that Kurt Aland founded—he who declared that the Byzantine MSS were irrelevant to the search for the original text—that INTF has now published the following:

Since the Textus Receptus was overcome by the scholarly textual criticism of the 19th century, there is tenacious negative bias against the Byzantine majority text. Wherever well-known, older textual witnesses like Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and even more so in combination with a papyrus, stand against the majority of minuscules, the decision against the majority text was often made easily, without seriously considering the quality of the variants in question. Therefore, the editors of the present edition have taken two factors as paramount.

First, it is often overlooked that in the vast majority of variant passages only a few witnesses differ from all the others. As a rule, the popular witnesses from the 4th / 5th centuries and, if extant, from even earlier papyri, agree with the majority of all witnesses. This implies that at all these passages the old age of the majority text is not in doubt.

Second, it is necessary to distinguish consistently between a manuscript and the text transmitted in it. “*Recentiores non deteriores*” is a principle widely accepted in editing philology, but in New Testament scholarship it was applied only to a few younger manuscripts featuring similar textual peculiarities as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. For the reason given

above, it is undoubtedly true that the textual tradition as a whole goes back to a very early period and that the coherent transmission of the majority of all textual witnesses provides a strong argument *for*, not *against*, the variant in question [emphasis in the original]. (Page 30* of the recent [2017] *Editio Critica Maior* for Acts.)

Well, well, well, better late than never! “The textual tradition as a whole” includes **f³⁵/K^r**, of necessity. The *Text und Textwert* series¹ is now complete for the whole NT, NT, except for John 11-21. The objective evidence it provides shows clearly, empirically, that Family 35 (**K^r**) is independent of the Byzantine bulk (Soden’s **K^x**) throughout the NT. It follows that it **cannot** be a revision of that bulk. Anyone who continues to affirm that von Soden’s **K^r** was a revision of his **K^x** is either uninformed or perverse.²

¹ *Text und Textwert der Griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments* (Ed. Kurt Aland, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

² To ignore clear evidence that has been called to your attention and to continue to promote a claim that you know is false, is to be perverse.