An exercise in logic

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How about a little exercise in logic? It is dealing with continuous-text Greek manuscripts containing parts or all of the New Testament. For a given stretch of text, suppose that we have three independent lines of transmission, or families, among the manuscripts. If two of them agree, they reflect the same source, and that source has to be older than its derivatives. If we have a situation involving those lines—call them **1**, **2**, **3**—that divide **1&2** X **3** and **1** X **2&3**, but never **1&3** X **2**, then **1&2** have the same source, and **2&3** have the same source. Now we face the question: do **1&2** and **2&3** have the same source, or do they have different sources? If they have the same source, then **2** is more faithful to that source than either **1** or **3**. But how can we determine whether or not they have the same source? To answer that question, let us consider an actual case. [Sporadically a 'natural' change may be made independently by more than one copyist, but not enough to invalidate my argument.]

I will use the stretch of text containing the episode of the adulterous woman: John 7:53 – 8:11 (twelve verses). Herman von Soden collated some 900 manuscripts for that stretch and determined that there were three major families, that he called M$^{5, 6 \text{ and } 7}$ (there being four much smaller ones). Maurice A. Robinson collated 1,389 manuscripts for that stretch[1] and confirmed that the three major families do exist—I will call them **5**, **6** and **7**. My article, "Von Soden's treatment of his **K**'", contains a comparison of the three at the 32 variant sets that are relevant to this exercise; that is, where one of them differs from the other two (based on Robinson's collations). When all three agree, they reflect the same source, of necessity. I made a rough count of the total of words within that stretch of text that are contained in all three families: there are 146. So for those 146 words, all three families have a common source.

Now I will consider the places where **5** diverges from the other two: there are 18 words. For three of those words, **5** is internally divided. So what are we to conclude: for those 18 words, did **6&7** go astray and **5** stay with the common source? In such an event **6&7** would represent a node subsequent to the common source. But is it not far more likely that it was **5** that strayed, especially for the words where it is divided?

Now I will consider the places where **6** diverges from the other two, but the calculation is difficult because **6** is 'squishy', with considerable internal division. It is internally divided 17 times out of the total of 32 variant sets, and 12 of the 17 times one of the variants agrees with **7**, while 9 of those 12 times it also agrees with **5** (so at those 9 sets all three lines reflect the common source, albeit one of them does so only in part). There are 12 words where **6** diverges from the other two without

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[1] Robinson has now collated 1,505 continuous-text manuscripts, plus 499 Lectionaries, and is preparing his collations for publication.

division—did **5**&**7** go astray and **6** stay with the common source? Given its 'squishiness', it really seems more likely that it was **6** that strayed. Further, if **6**&**7** and **5**&**7** both represent different nodes subsequent to the common source, how could **7** be part of both such nodes? How could **7** be a revision based on those nodes if it already existed? [If a revision happened in stages, who directed those stages? And how could the same 'stage' happen in a variety of isolated monasteries?]

I need to inform the reader that in the above calculations I did not include one variant set where all three lines have something different (and the Lectionaries have a fourth major variant, which is curious, but this exercise does not include them). I also did not include another set that involves only a different spelling for the same word and where all lines have some division. Now then, **7** has a single, clear-cut, unambiguous profile/mosaic, as defined by 127 MSS—there is no internal variation among them (the 127 are precisely the same for all twelve verses). This contrasts dramatically with **6** and **5**. Further, **7** and **6** join against **5** fourteen times; **7** and **5** join against **6** nine times; but **6** and **5** join against **7** <u>not one single time</u>. So, does this mean that **7** is dependent on **5** and **6**, or does it mean that **5** and **6** are independent departures from **7**? I have already given the answer above.

It is necessary to understand the significance of the absence of **5**&**6** X **7**. It means that the three lines are not equal. Either **7** is superior to the other two, or it is inferior to them. So which is it? The three lines have distinct profiles, or mosaics of readings. That is, they each have a list of variant readings that is different from all other such lists; each line has its own DNA, so to speak. This argues against the possibility that any two of them had a common source subsequent to the main source that is reflected in all three. The absence of a subsequent source means that **7** is more faithful to the main source than either of the other two, and is therefore superior to them. Also, the set where all three go separate ways proves that **7** is independent of the other two at that point; what objective basis is there for saying that it is not independent of them elsewhere as well? Remember that all three agree on 146 words, compared to **5**'s 18 private words, and **6**'s 12 private words—and **7**'s <u>zero</u> private words (except for the set where all three are different, and I did not count those words anywhere).

Does not the internal confusion that characterizes **6** undermine its claim to reliability? If so, it is the worst of the three. In stark contrast, besides the 127 manuscripts that are perfect **7**, another 55 are off by a single letter, that merely gives a different spelling to the same word (= 182 MSS); another 26 are off by a single change; another 27 are off by two changes (= 235 MSS), and so on. The level of internal consistency that characterizes **7** (Family 35) is extraordinary; no other line of transmission, anywhere in the NT, comes close to that level. If you believe that the Bible is God's Word, that declares God's intention to preserve it, what does that picture tell you?