

An Examination of the Alexandrian Texts
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Why Listen to Egypt?

During the last hundred years it has been a commonplace of New Testament criticism to argue that the Alexandrian text-type is the most reliable among those available, and should receive the most consideration in any attempt to reconstruct the original text of the New Testament. It has been and continues to be the dominant point of view. Anyone who uses a United Bible Society (*UBS3*) or Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text is, in effect, subscribing to that position, as is anyone who uses a version based upon them (almost all modern versions in English). It is the *de facto* position of the International Translation Department of Wycliffe Bible Translators since its Exegetical Helps series and Semantic Structure series basically follow *UBS3*.

That much is fact, but is it a good thing? There are over 6,000 differences between *UBS3* and the form of the text exhibited by the vast majority of Greek manuscripts (*MSS*). Not infrequently *UBS3* follows a few Egyptian witnesses against the united voice of the rest of the world. Does prudence suggest a query at this point? It is this writer's conviction that it does.

What are Egypt's claims upon our confidence? Why should we listen to Egypt against the rest of the world? I will write from the standpoint of those who believe and/or claim that the New Testament is God's Word. But why would God bother to provide a written revelation? If His purpose was to limit His communication to a single individual, community or people, at a given point in history, He would presumably use the spoken medium. If His purpose was to reach all people and all generations, then the written medium would be indicated. 2 Timothy 3:16 gives some account of the purpose, or at least the usefulness, of Scripture -- something not limited to one generation. The Old Testament, at least, was written for the benefit of succeeding generations, to the end of the ages (1 Corinthians 10:11). The point is, if God wants His written revelation to benefit future generations, it must be preserved for them. Also, it must be recognized for what it is. In other words, when the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writings He had to have a plan for making sure they would be recognized as Scripture and faithfully transmitted down through the centuries.

So, how would God proceed so as to achieve these two objectives? He evidently worked through the Church, using godly men. The Apostles knew they were writing Scripture, and the surviving writings of the earliest Church fathers of the first and second centuries show clearly that they recognized and used the New Testament writings as Scripture. Ireneaus wrote before the year A.D. 200. In his

surviving writings he quotes from every New Testament book except Philemon and 3 John, but he may have used them, too, in other writings that have not reached us. Evidently the dimensions of the New Testament Canon recognized by Ireneaus are very close to what we hold today. I emphasize the early, virtually immediate, recognition of the canonicity of the New Testament writings because it is a crucial factor for a correct understanding of what happened in their transmission.

What factors would be important for guaranteeing, or at least, facilitating, a faithful transmission of the text of the New Testament writings? I submit that there are three controlling factors: (1) an appropriate attitude toward the Text; (2) proficiency in the source language; and (3) access to the Autographs. First, the appropriate attitude.

The Proper Attitude Toward the Text

When 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 go down. If they understand, but do not agree, they might even resort to sabotage. In the case of the New Testament books we may begin with the question, "Why would copies be made?" We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the New Testament writings from the start, so the making of copies would have begun at once.

A second question would be, "What was the attitude of the copyists toward their work?" 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. 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 might have been 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 believing that they were careful.

However, as the influence of Christianity spread and began to make an impact on the world, opposition of various sorts arose. Also, there came to be divisions within the larger Christian community. In some cases faithfulness to an ideological position evidently became more important than faithfulness to the New Testament Text. It is certain that Church fathers who wrote during the second century complained bitterly about the deliberate alterations to the Text perpetrated by heretics. Such a scenario was totally predictable. If the New Testament 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 New Testament without taking due account of that interest is irresponsible.

The Necessity of Proficiency

As a linguist 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. It follows that any divine solicitude for the precise form of the New Testament 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 New Testament). That is by way of background, but our main concern here is with 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. Consider the case of *p66*. This papyrus manuscript is perhaps the oldest (c. 200) extant New Testament manuscript of any size. It is one of the worst copies we have. It has an average of roughly two mistake per verse -- many being obvious mistakes, stupid mistakes, nonsensical mistakes. 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 he did.

Now consider the problem from God's point of view. To whom should He entrust the primary responsibility for the faithful transmission of the New Testament Text? If the Holy Spirit is 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.

Who Had Access to the Autographs?

This criterion probably applied for 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 A.D. 100 there must have been many copies of the various books while it was certainly still possible to check a copy against the original, 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 have known that the true wording could be verified, which would discourage them from taking liberties with the text. However, distance would presumably be a factor. 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.

Around the year 208, Tertullian claimed that the Apostles' "own authentic" writings were still being read in churches that received them. This expression might be understood to refer to the Autographs, although it seems scarcely possible that they could have survived so long, but at least it must mean that the respective churches were using exact copies. Was anything else to be expected? For example, when the elders of the Ephesian church saw that Autograph of Paul's letter to them getting frazzled, would they not carefully execute an identical copy for their own continued use? Would they allow the Autograph to perish without making such a copy? Would *you*? I believe we are obliged to conclude that in the year 200 the Ephesian church was still in a position to affirm the precise original wording of her letter (and so for the other holders of Autographs) -- but this is coeval with *p46*, *p66*, and *p75*!

So who held these 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, John's three epistles, and Revelation), Greece may be safely said to have had six (1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Titus in Crete), and 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, and Hebrews by Rome or Palestine. Jude was quite possibly held by Asia Minor. Taking Asia Minor and Greece together, the Aegean area held the Autographs of at least eighteen 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, and Alexandria (Egypt) had *none*! The Aegean region clearly had the best start, and Alexandria the worst.

Can Alexandrian Manuscripts be Trusted?

How does Egypt rate in terms of the three controlling factors discussed above? First, when did Christianity come to Egypt, and how strong was the Church there during the first and second centuries? I am not aware of any apostolic ministry in Egypt, although there is tradition to the effect that Mark the Evangelist labored there. 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.

Is it possible to evaluate their attitude toward the Text? The school of literary criticism that existed at Alexandria would have been a negative factor. But there is simple 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 MSS

were being produced. Exactly when Alexandrian text-critical principles were first used is not known. The Christian school founded in Alexandria by Pantaenus, around 180, was bound to be influenced by the scholars of the great library in that city.

To the extent that the roots of the allegorical approach to biblical interpretation 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 interpretations of the Old Testament began to rub off on the young church already in the first century. A literalist is obliged to be concerned about the precise wording of the text since his interpretation or exegesis hinges upon it. Since an allegorist is going to impose his own ideas on the text anyway, he would presumably have fewer inhibitions about altering it.

How about proficiency in Greek? The use of Greek in Egypt was already declining by the beginning of the Christian era. To what extent was it the mother tongue of the bulk of the population? 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. 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. 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.

By the fourth century the level of proficiency in Greek to be found in Egypt must have been seriously reduced, yet it produced the two most important witnesses usually attributed to the Alexandrian text-type. The parchment codices *B* (*Vaticanus*) and *Aleph* (*Sinaiticus*) are assigned to the fourth century and are generally understood to have been produced in Egypt. In the Gospels alone these two MSS differ well over 3,000 times, which number does not include minor errors such as spelling, nor even variants between certain synonyms. Now then, simple logic demands the conclusion that one or the other must be wrong 3,000 or more times -- that is, they have over 3,000 mistakes between them just in the Gospels.

Finally, how about access to the Autographs? Well, on this score Egypt was really in a bad way. Not only did the Egyptian church have none itself, but even the nearest ones were probably no closer than Jerusalem, and even so only until A.D. 70. The vast majority were across the Sea. If the Church got off to a slow start in Egypt, and remained weak into the second century (not to mention the Gnostic

influence), we may wonder to what extent they would feel the need, or be willing to pay, to consult the Autographs.

Conclusion

Putting it all together, what are Egypt's claims upon our confidence? Frankly, it seems to me to be virtually impossible that a faithful, high quality transmission of the New Testament Text could have taken place in Egypt -- it simply lacked the necessary qualifications. Besides, we have the proof of the pudding. Each of the early MSS that is assigned to the Alexandrian text-type is in itself a poor copy -- demonstrably so. Not only that, they disagree among themselves to an astonishing extent. Not to mention the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times they disagree, as a group, with the rest of the world.

Is there a better way? Well, where do the three controlling factors point? The Aegean region was the area that was best qualified, from every point of view, to transmit the true Text, from the very first. I know of no reason to doubt that the Byzantine text-type is in fact the form of the Text that was known and transmitted in the Aegean area from the beginning. It is the result of the normal, faithful transmission of the New Testament Text -- in every age, including the second and third centuries, it has been the traditional text.

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