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A HISTORY OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT – FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE INVENTION OF PRINTING

The purpose of this article is to present a brief history of the Greek text of the New Testament. The period of time that has been taken into consideration starts around the beginning of the Christian era and ends at around the time when the printing press was invented by Gutenberg. The discussion is devoted to the different kinds of witnesses to the Greek New Testament, such as the papyri, parchment manuscripts, minuscule manuscripts, and finally paper manuscripts. It occurs that the existing manuscripts are mere copies of copies, as the archetype manuscripts were lost at an early date. Nevertheless, by studying the earliest manuscripts, as well as a number of later manuscripts, it is possible to get a rough idea of what the original Greek text looked like.

1. Introduction

According to Bromiley (1995), the manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament is much more abundant than that for any other ancient document and there are around 5000 manuscripts of part or all of the Greek text, 2000 Greek lectionaries, 8000 manuscripts in Latin, and a thousand additional manuscripts in other ancient versions. These manuscripts contain extensive parts of the New Testament, which were copied hardly more than a century after the original text was written, and fifty or more manuscripts were copied within three centuries after the original books of the New Testament. Additionally, there are thousands of quotations from the New Testament in the writings of the ancient Church Fathers in Greek, Latin and Syriac. Because of the fact that the available materials for the text of the New Testament are so extensive, their adequate study is a very complicated task. Comfort (2005) examines the earliest witnesses to the Greek New Testament in the early centuries of the church and he refers to them as ‘publications’. However, he says that the word ‘publication’ in those days did

not mean exactly the same as what it means for modern readers today, to whom publication means written material such as books, magazines, or newspapers. To the ancient people publishing meant both oral and written dissemination of poems, stories, messages, or other materials. When something was being published, it meant that it was broadcast to people by oral and/or written proclamation. The most common practice was that a written account was prepared to be a vehicle for oral proclamation, and it was rarely the case that the written account was the only means of getting something published, as many ancient people could not read at all, and thus they were completely dependent on oral delivery when they were to be exposed to a publication. As regards the publication of the New Testament, Comfort (2005) says that it came about in several stages:

1. As individual writings, which were published between AD 49 and 90.
2. As collections, such as the four Gospels and Paul's major Epistles; whereas the Pauline collections were published by AD 100-125, the Gospel collections were published by the early second century.
3. As an entire entity, the New Testament, containing all 27 books of the canon, was published as a unit in the early fourth century. At this time it was also included with the Greek Old Testament in one codex.

Bromiley (1995) enumerates the following sources of evidence for the text of the New Testament: 1. Papyrus manuscripts (papyri), 2. Parchment manuscripts, 3. Minuscule manuscripts, and 4. Lectionaries.

2. Papyrus manuscripts

Epp (2013:1) notes that the papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament are the earliest category of the witnesses to the New Testament text. Papyrus was invented in the third millennium BC and it was used as a material to write on in the Mediterranean region, namely in Egypt, Greece and Rome, and in some other countries. As Aland and Aland (1981) observe, this writing material was produced primarily in Egypt from the papyrus plant (Lat. *cyperus papyrus*) which grew luxuriously in the delta of the Nile. The plant grew to a height of six meters and its thick stem was divided into sections. It was necessary to use a sharp tool in order to cut it lengthwise into wafer-thin strips, which were then laid side by side to form a single layer with the fibers of the pith running in parallel. On top of the layer a second layer was placed the way that the fibers were running at right angles to the first layer. Afterwards, the two layers were moistened, pressed together, smoothed down and finally any projecting fibres were trimmed off and the papyrus sheet was ready to be cut to the desired size. The sheets were sufficiently flexible to be pasted together in scrolls of up to 10 meters in length. However, although all the literature of the period (i.e. letters,

poems, stories, documents, decrees, and other documents) was written on scrolls, with the exception of the Jewish Holy Scripture which was written down on leather, Christians did not use the scroll format for their writings, but rather the codex having the form of a book. Around 200 CE, due to the fact that parchment was becoming more and more commonly used, the practice of writing on papyrus gradually ceased to be as popular as in the past, and by around the 4th century parchment became the common material on which the manuscripts of the New Testament were written. However, although parchment became a new widely-used medium of writing, papyrus was replaced only gradually and it was used well into the eighth century CE. As regards the original manuscripts of the New Testament books, on the basis of which the later papyri were produced, they were most likely also written on papyrus, but unfortunately they were lost at a very early date. Nevertheless, contemporary documents, which were discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries, provide a fairly clear idea of their probable form. Nowadays a total of 127 papyri are known, and the oldest of them is labeled P52. Scholz (2009) says that it is a tiny fragment of a papyrus manuscript (21 cm x 20 cm) and it is commonly dated around 125 CE. This fragment, considered by many scholars to hold the distinction of being the earliest manuscript evidence of the New Testament, is double-sided and contains John 18:31-33 on one side and John 18:37-38 on the other. In other words it represents the section of John's Gospel which depicts Jesus on trial before Pilate (John 18:28-40). Today, P52 forms part of the collection of the Greek papyri which can be found in the John Rylands Library in Manchester. The papyrus was originally discovered in Oxyrhynchus (Behnesa) in Upper Egypt, and it was acquired by Bernard Grenfel in 1920. Furthermore, the papyri, as Hull (2010) observes, are worn and scrappy bits that early Christians had discarded along with letters and receipts, and it was not easy to classify them according to the traditional three groups of the New Testament textual studies, namely Alexandrian, Western and Byzantine, and neither was it easy to evaluate the character of text found on them, even on the largest fragments.

3. Parchment manuscripts

Another source of evidence for the text of the New Testament are parchment manuscripts. Aland and Aland (1981) say that Christians were following the trend of the times and they changed to parchment, which was invented shortly before the Christian era and gradually started to replace papyrus. Although papyrus was quite a durable material, it could not match the durability offered by parchment. It was made of animal hide, usually of a sheep or a goat, which had the flesh and hair removed by a solution of lime mordant. Parchment was then trimmed to size, polished and smoothed with chalk and pumice stone, in order to prepare the surface for writing on. Whereas the fibers of a papyrus sheet allowed the scribe to write in straight lines, with parchment it was different and the lines needed to

be drawn, which was accomplished by means of a metal stylus, which often left deep impressions on it that can still be seen today.

According to Bromiley (1995), at the time that the New Testament was written there were two styles of Greek handwriting in circulation. One of them was cursive and it was used for private purposes, whereas the other was the so called uncial writing (i.e. majuscule writing), which employed somewhat rounded capital letters. The earliest known manuscripts of all parts of the New Testament (the Gospels, the Acts, and some other books) were written in uncial handwriting. As a matter of fact, although the Pauline Epistles were probably originally written in the cursive hand, they were very soon turned into uncials. Although the handwriting in the papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament was uncial, the term ‘uncial manuscripts’ is commonly used to designate only those written on parchment and vellum¹. Today 299 uncials are known and they all date from 4th through 10th centuries. The most important Greek uncials are:

1. Codex \aleph (01), Codex Sinaiticus. It dates to the 4th century and was found by Constantin Tischendorf at St. Catherine Monastery on Mt. Sinai and first published in Tischendorf (1862). Codex Sinaiticus is the only uncial that contains the entire New Testament, i.e. Gospels, Acts, Paul, General Epistles and Revelation, plus the Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas, and was written on thin velum in four columns per page. Now it is in the British Museum in London; it is now also accessible on-line².
2. Codex A (02), Codex Alexandrinus. The manuscript is believed to date to the 5th century and it received its name due to the fact that its earliest known location is identified with the Egyptian city of Alexandria. It was a gift of Patriarch Cyril Lucar, the Eastern Orthodox Bishop of Alexandria, to King James I of England in 1627, and today finds itself in the British Library. It was first published in Woide (1786). The text of the manuscript, written on thin velum, is arranged in two columns, and not in four as is the case with the Codex Sinaiticus. The text contains the entire New Testament except portions of Matthew, John, and Corinthians. It also includes some early Christian writings, namely the first and the second Epistle of Clement and Psalms of Salomon.
3. Codex B (03), Codex Vaticanus. The manuscript is believed to date from the 4th century and it derives its name from the fact that it is the most famous manuscript in the possession of the Vatican, where it has been at least since 1481. It is regarded the chief treasure of the Vatican Library and it is believed to be the oldest and best manuscript of the Greek New Testament that exists. The manuscript was written on fine velum in three

¹ The difference between parchment and vellum consists in that velum is calfskin, or similar fine skin, whereas parchment is made from the more ordinary kinds of skin, but both types of writing material underwent the same treatment specified above.

² At: <http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?book=33&lid=en&side=r&zoomSlider=0>

columns. The Codex Vaticanus lacks part of Hebrews, all of the Pastoral Epistles and Revelation, and it often agrees with the texts that are believed to be the underlying texts of the ancient Coptic, Syriac, and Latin versions against the later Greek manuscripts. Moreover, it is relatively free of obvious transcriptional errors, and it is usually accepted to be the best representative of the ancient “Alexandrian” form of the New Testament³. The text underwent numerous changes introduced by later scribes. The first published edition of the manuscript was that of Mai (1857), but since it is said to be very faulty, the first reliable edition of the manuscript is the one published by Tischendorf (1867).

4. Codex C (04), Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus. The manuscript dates to the 5th century and is one of the most important of the palimpsests⁴. The New Testament text, written on velum, was arranged in one column. The name ‘Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus’ has been given to the manuscript because of the fact that parts of the original New Testament text were erased and substituted by a Greek translation of thirty eight sermons of Ephraem of Syria. As a matter of fact, a third part of the New Testament cannot be read⁵. The manuscript was brought to Italy from the East in the 16th century and then it traveled to France. Today it is in the possession of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. The first printed edition of the Codex was that of Tischendorf (1843).
5. Codex D (05), Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis. This manuscript is believed to date to late 5th century. It derives its name from the fact that in 1562 it was obtained by Theodore Beza from the monastery of St. Irenaeus at Lyons. In the year 1581 Beza gave the manuscript to the University of Cambridge (Lat. *Cantabrigia*), where it has remained since then on. It is a Greek and Latin diglot, where Greek is on the left and Latin on the right, and it contains only the Gospels and the Acts, plus a fragment of 3 John. The New Testament text is written in one column. Moreover, first readings of the manuscript appeared in the margin of Estienne (1550) and then in Beza’s notes (1565). However, the text of the New Testament was first presented in full by Kipling (1793)⁶.

4. Minuscule manuscripts

Yet another source of evidence for the text of the New Testament are the so called minuscule manuscripts. Following Bromiley (1995), starting from the 9th century a literary hand developed out of the cursive hand, which for centuries had

³ Source: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/codex-b.html>

⁴ Palimpsests are manuscripts whose original text was removed and replaced by some other text, not necessarily biblical.

⁵ Source: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/codex-c.html>

⁶ Source: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/codex-d1.html>

been used for private writing. This literary hand was given the name ‘minuscule’ (i.e. small lettered) and it was more formalized than the cursive hand. An obvious advantage of minuscule over the uncial was that it offered a more rapid writing. The minuscule practically displaced the uncial by the end of the 10th century. Gutas (1998:176) notes that:

... all existing Greek manuscripts [...] until the middle to the end of the eighth century, i.e., until the beginning of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, were written in uncials, the Greek majuscule hand. The minuscule came into use by about this time, and it took some considerable time before Greek scribes in Byzantium transcribed manuscripts into minuscule. The distinction between uncial and minuscule manuscripts is important for gauging their number and availability. The old, large hand is neat but cumbersome, and it takes more space than the cursive and smaller minuscule hand. This means that it took longer to transcribe codices in uncials than in minuscule, and that accordingly uncial manuscripts would be more expensive than minuscule.

Black (1994) observes that minuscule manuscripts are designated by Arabic numerals and approximately 2,555 of these manuscripts are known today. The most significant of them are Codex 1, dated to the twelfth century and now kept in the Basel University Library in Switzerland, Codex 13, dated to the thirteenth century and now housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Codex 33, dated to the ninth century and also kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, and Codex 700, dated to the eleventh century and now kept in the British Library. Generally speaking, the minuscule manuscripts date from the ninth century until after the invention of printing in the mid 15th century. Moreover, the earlier minuscule manuscripts tend to be more carefully copied than the later ones and they have little or no ornamentation. Moreover, although the vast majority of Greek New Testament texts are minuscules, relatively few of them are significant for the determination of the original, due to the fact that they are late in date.

5. Lectionaries

As far as lectionaries are concerned, Black (1994) says that they are manuscripts containing New Testament passages which are not given in regular sequence but rather as weekly lessons for reading in the church’s worship services. The number of the known lectionaries of the New Testament amounts to about two thousand and they are designated by the letter *l* or by the abbreviation *Lect*. All the books of the New Testament, excepting Revelation, are excerpted in the lectionaries, though some of the books (such as Acts) are cited far from completely. Moreover, the text of most lectionaries is very similar to the text found in the majority of minuscule manuscripts, and a few of the lectionaries date from as early as the fifth century, as for example lectionary 1043. However,

the majority of the lectionaries are estimated to date from the tenth century and later. Sitterly (1929) notes that lectionaries and service-books of the early Christian period are a source of considerable value in determining the general type of texts, together with the order, contents and distribution of the several books of the Canon. Lectionaries present data of real worth for determining certain problems of textual criticism, due to the fact that their systems, both of the eastern and western churches, go back to post-apostolic times and are all marked by great verbal conservatism.

6. Paper manuscripts

Aland and Aland (1981) note that parchment continued to be used as a vehicle of writing until recent centuries. However, starting from the twelfth century paper started to gain in popularity and New Testament manuscripts started to be predominantly written on this medium. As a matter of fact, somewhere else paper was in circulation much earlier, after it was invented in China in the first century A.D. According to Kalman (2008), the culture of ancient China was more advanced than the culture of any other country at that time, and in those days Europe had never seen creations such as the ones invented by the Chinese. Among these creations were the clock, compass, wheelbarrow, crossbow, animal harness, porcelain, ink, playing cards, and paper. Numerous adventurers and merchants traveled to China and they brought these objects back to their countries, and in this way the Chinese inventions spread gradually in the rest of the world. As regards writing, in ancient China written records were kept on bamboo strips, which were tied together. However, it was difficult to store these documents because of the fact that they took too much room. In 105 CE, Ts'ai Lun, who was an official with the imperial court, had an ingenious idea. Having made a mushy mixture of mulberry bark, hemp, rags, water, and old fishing nets, he pressed the pulp into a thin sheet and then allowed it to dry. The result of this procedure was the first piece of paper. Aland and Aland (1981) say that starting from the eighth century the use of paper first spread throughout the Arab world and then reached the West. However, in the West it was as late as in the twelfth century that it assumed a significant role. Nevertheless, the earliest manuscript of the New Testament written on paper dates from the ninth century. Aland and Aland (1981) also say that of the 5,400 known manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, around 1,300 are written on paper. These paper manuscripts include 2 uncials, 698 minuscules, and 587 lectionaries; in 5 lectionaries and 11 minuscules parchment and paper are found together. They also demonstrate that there was an increased number of (surviving) New Testament text manuscripts from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. Although in the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a huge number of manuscripts was produced, their number starts to decrease gradually starting from the thirteenth century onwards. Aland and Aland (1981:78) further observe that "An estimate of the

number of manuscripts actually produced in each century is of course possible only within limits because of varying rates of attrition; i.e., losses would be greater during the Diocletianic persecution than before, and in the fifteenth century the Islamic invasion of the Christian Greek world produced a similar situation.” However, the invention of the printing press contributed to the gradual decrease in the production of manuscripts. The printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450 A.D, and this invention very soon revolutionized the world, writing became easier and faster and thus books of different sorts could spread more rapidly. Koester (2000) notes that after the invention of the printing press the first complete book that was printed was the Gutenberg Bible of 1456, the Bible in the Latin text of the Vulgate. However, as regards the Greek Bible, it would take more than half a century before the first text appeared in print. It was the Spanish cardinal Ximenes who in the year 1502 began preparations for a polyglot edition of the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin. The fifth volume of this polyglot, containing the text of the New Testament, was printed in 1514, whereas the other volumes were printed in the following years. The text is referred to as the “Complutensian Polyglot” due to the fact that it was published by the Complutense University, Alcalá. Because the final publication of this polyglot took place in 1522, it was denied the honour of being the first ever printed edition of the Greek New Testament. As Koester (2000) observes, this honour was given to the famous humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who in 1515, encouraged by the Basel printer Froben, began to prepare an edition of the Greek New Testament. The entire Greek text of the New Testament was published in 1516 and it was accompanied by Erasmus’s Latin translation. It was until the 19th century that the text, with only minor alterations, persisted as the standard form of the Greek New Testament. It served as the basis of Luther’s German translation, and of the English translation known as King James Version, as well as of all other Western translations based on the Greek text. Koester (2000) further says that Erasmus prepared his edition in a great hurry, which resulted in that the text turned out to be inferior because of numerous misprints. Moreover, he used only a few late minuscules, although he had access to a superior minuscule manuscript dating from the 12th century, namely Codex 1, which he dared not use at all because of the fact that, as he admitted, it differed greatly from the other manuscripts he knew. That he did not make use of Codex 1 was undoubtedly unfortunate. Nevertheless, Koester (2000:30) says that “Although the vast majority [of minuscules] present the less valuable Byzantine text, a careful scrutiny of the minuscules has demonstrated that even a very late manuscript can be a witness for some valuable ancient readings. The testimony of the minuscules should therefore not be disregarded.” Moreover, Erasmus retranslated the missing passages into Greek from the Latin Vulgate in places where the Greek text was unreadable or when it was missing altogether. In this way he created a number of Greek words that had never before existed. Such was the case with the Book of Revelation, for which he had only one single manuscript which was partially unreadable and lacked

the last page. Nevertheless, later editions corrected hundreds of misprints of Erasmus's overly hasty edition. Further, during the 16th century other printed editions of the Greek New Testament followed and several scholars began to add a critical apparatus to their printed editions, listing variant readings, taken at first from other Greek manuscripts and then from quotations in the Church Fathers, as well as from other translations of the New Testament. Such was the case with Robert Etienne (=Stephanus) (1550) and Beza (1565), who printed several editions of this kind. In the printing process, both editors mixed readings from Erasmus's edition and from the Complutensian Polyglot. In 1624 another edition of the Greek New Testament appeared. It was the one released by Elzevir, a Dutch printing company. The edition was produced on the basis of the text of Erasmus compared with the Complutensian Polyglot, and it was advertised as "the text that is now received by all", hence the name Received Text, or Textus Receptus. Later publications were enriched by new material from known and newly discovered manuscripts of the New Testament and very often they departed from the original Textus Receptus based on Erasmus's text and that of the Complutensian Polyglot. According to Anderson and Anderson (2013), there were around 30 distinct editions of the Textus Receptus made over the years, each differing slightly from the others, basically in spelling, accents, breathing marks, word order, plus other minor differences.

7. Conclusion

This article is far from being a thorough and exhaustive study of the subject, as it is but a mere reconnaissance of the subject and an introduction to the adventure concerning the issue of the appearance, development and translation of the Greek New Testament, as well as to Biblical textual criticism. By way of conclusion, let me use the words of Black (1994), who says that there are around five thousand witnesses to the Greek text of the New Testament, ranging between the second and the eighteenth centuries, and if we compare the number of the Greek New Testament manuscripts with the number of the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts, it will occur that the number of the latter roughly speaking amounts only to the half of the former, although the text of the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts is more uniform than that exhibited by the manuscripts of the New Testament. What is more, the earliest surviving copies of the Greek New Testament are much closer to the date of the original writing, and thus to the archetype, than is the case with almost any other piece of writing being representative of the ancient literature. It is even also very probable that in the future new discoveries will yet be made of ancient Greek manuscripts, which will undoubtedly throw additional light on the original words of the Greek New Testament.

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