Ancient New Testament Manuscripts
Understanding Text-Types

Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church, Lancaster, California
www.valleybible.net

1. Review of variants

There are over 400,000 different variants that exist within the 5,800+ ancient New Testament manuscripts. We have such a large number of variants because we have such a large number of manuscripts—the fewer the manuscripts, the fewer the variants. These variants are by and large not meaningful differences; they are trivial changes such as spelling and grammar changes. Differences in the text that may change the meaning of the text are largely not part of the original text due to either the lateness of the reading or the scarcity of the reading.

Of the less that one percent of these variants that are meaningful in some way and have some chance of being in the original text, there is a method for evaluating what reading is most likely the original reading of the text. This field of study is known as textual criticism.

2. Textual criticism

Textual criticism refers to the task of determining the reading of the original text. Textual criticism occurs when any original text does not exist and where copies of the original do not agree with each other. It is not a discipline that is only for the New Testament, it is frequently done with ancient texts where multiple copies exist.

The goal of textual criticism is to try to ascertain the wording of the original text when that text is no longer available. The challenge of textual criticism is particularly great with the New Testament in light of the very large number of manuscripts. When we speak of the original text, we refer to the text that the New Testament author originally wrote and distributed to his readers. This is referred to as the "autographic text" or the "autographs."

In order to ascertain the original reading of the New Testament text, we must look at what changes happened and how they occurred. In order to do this, we must consider the relation of the manuscripts to each other, noting the various similarities and differences.

3. The history of textual criticism

For the first centuries of the church, New Testament manuscripts were hard to come by. Persecution racked the church until the early fourth century. Few Christians owned a complete New Testament, even if they could read, due to the cost and labor. Obtaining the Scripture was more important than evaluating the accuracy of the copy.

From the fifth to the fifteenth century, the majority of the church used Latin. The Eastern Church would use Greek until the end of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, but most of the church used Latin, which explains why we have far more copies of the Latin Vulgate translation than we do of the Greek New Testament. For a thousand years the Vulgate was the Bible of the church.

The invention of the printing press in 1454 allowed the multiple copies of the Greek New Testament to be produced. This was fueled by the Protestant Reformation (1517), which brought a return to the study of the Scripture and the desire to see it translated into other languages. This led to the King James Version (1611) being the Authorized Version in the English speaking world. It was translated by examining the available Greek and Hebrew texts, thus delving into textual criticism when they were faced with textual issues.

In the eighteenth and ninetieth centuries, the discovery of older texts resulted in a reevaluation of the Greek texts that were used in the translation of the King James Version. In 1881, Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort published the first Greek text based upon these older manuscripts. This Greek text, and others following their similar methodology, would shift the Greek text that would be used in the vast majority of modern Bible translations, beginning with the Revised Version in 1885.

Since the late ninetieth century, most of the ancient New Testament papyri (c. 125-700 A.D.) have been discovered, only serving to validate the methodology of this Greek text underlying the modern translations. Modern computer technology now allows us to digitize and examine the thousands of existing Greek texts, and making the comparison of manuscripts within reach of more scholars and the efficiency of this monumental task greatly improved.

4. The text-types

As manuscripts are compared to each other it becomes clear that the existing texts that were copied earlier have significant differences compared to large majority of later texts that remain. This comparison has led to the study of text-types.

A text-type is an attempt to group New Testament manuscripts together in order to evaluate the character of a specific manuscript. As such, a text-type does not refer to a specific type of variant reading, but rather to the manuscript in its textual relationship to other manuscripts.

It is important to remember that text-types are a result of an attempt at analyzing the manuscripts; there is no actual official text-type. In other words, this has been done from examining manuscripts, not due to any intent by those who copied the manuscripts.

Also, there really is no ability to see a direct mother/daughter relationship between texts, the best we can do is see "family" relationships. This approach to attempt to find a family tree to connect which manuscripts descended from others is known as "stemmatics."

Perhaps with computer technology and with future discoveries we may improve what is now an embryonic area of study.

Nevertheless, there are several text-types that have been proposed by scholars over the past two centuries of textual criticism, grouped according to geography.

a. The Byzantine text-type

The Byzantine text is by far the most common among the manuscripts. It was widespread, well beyond the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine text exists in many uncials, and in most of the minuscules. Estimates are that over 80% of the minuscules are purely Byzantine and over 90% of the minuscules are primarily Byzantine. Therefore, the later the text, the more likely the text-type is Byzantine.

The Byzantine text is also referred to as the "Majority Text" due to its large number of manuscripts. The King James Version was based upon manuscripts that were Byzantine in nature.

The Byzantine text shows a great tendency toward making the differences between the synoptic Gospels less. The wording of the Gospels will be more similar with this text and the Greek text will flow more smoothly. We also find a reduction in exegetical issues. For example, Mark 1:2 in the Byzantine text drops the reference to Isaiah when the quote is a mixture from Malachi and Isaiah. Several families of manuscripts have been grouped as subsets of the Byzantine text based upon their similarities.

b. The Alexandrian text-type

The Alexandrian text-type is represented in the earliest manuscripts, including the two oldest uncials, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, and in the papyri. The Alexandrian text-type is represented in the earliest translation of the text into Coptic (late second century).

The Alexandrian text-type is characterized by the following tendencies:

- To have fewer words
- To leave out verses
- To have more differences between the synoptic gospels
- To have more readings that are considered more difficult
- To have a more abrupt style

c. The Western text-type

The Western text-type has been associated with Codex Bezae, a fifth century uncial. It has also been connected with the Old Latin and Syrian translations from the second or third centuries. A few papyri and uncials have an association with the Western text-type but while existing in old manuscripts, there are very few representatives of this text-type. The Greek texts tend to be diglots, with Latin and Greek texts.

The biggest reason to give more serious consideration to the Western text-type has more to do with quotes from church fathers rather than textual evidence. Quotations from the church fathers tend to follow this text more than the other text-types. The Western text-type is the loosest, most expansive and almost paraphrasing of all the text-types.

d. The Caesarean text-type

The Caesarean text-type is the most controversial as it has no manuscripts that are considered to purely represent this text-type. It is more an attempt to group texts with various readings that fall between the Western and Alexandrian text-types. It is only conjectured to exist in the Gospels.

Other test-types and families of manuscripts have been postulated but the most basic conclusion to the analysis of text-types is that there are two large classifications that dominate the discussion, the Byzantine text-type and the Alexandrian text-type.

5. The mixing of text types

To complicate matters even more, not all manuscripts are uniquely one text-type. Some manuscripts are a mixture of readings, even to the point of being difficult to classify them into a text-type.

The can also happen when the one manuscript that was copied from was only from the Gospels. For example, Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400-440 A.D.) reflects the Byzantine text-type in the Gospels and the Alexandrian text-type elsewhere. It is not uncommon for one section of the New Testament manuscript to reflect a different text-type than another section. This can even happen when a part of a book is copied from a different manuscript, such as Codex Sinaiticus, which is Alexandrian in its text in all places, except for the first nine chapters of John.

When a large portion of a manuscript demonstrates a different text-type, it is referred to as a "block mixture." This occurred because a scribe may have worked off a partial New Testament copy or because the copy that he started with became unavailable as he continued (the copying process did not happen in a day).

6. The evaluation of the text-types

a. The Byzantine text-type

The simple perspective is the older manuscripts are closer to the original text, therefore the Byzantine text-type is a later development. This is why the vast majority of modern translations work from a Greek text that more closely reflects the Alexandrian text.

However, there are people who support a view that opposes the Alexandrian text-type. One large and vocal group is unique because they oppose the entire study of textual criticism for philosophical reasons alone. These are commonly referred to as "King James Only" advocates. Their premise is that God must have preserved the original text intact and that must be the Greek text supports the translation of the King James Version in 1611. That text is known as the Textus Receptus and this view will be addressed more in an upcoming class.

The more scholarly support for Byzantine text-type comes from those who advocate the Majority Text. In 1982, Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad published a Greek text, *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*. Their premise was that the majority text (that is, the bulk of the existing manuscripts in the Byzantine text-type tradition) would be normally and naturally be expected to contain the original text of the New Testament. In other words, the cream would rise to the top.

This argument from numerical superiority can easily be rejected when we recognize that there were outside factors that significantly changed the course of the transmission of the text. Notably, the area of North Africa fell into Muslim hands beginning in the seventh century.

The Byzantine Empire remained culturally Christian until it fell to the Turks in 1453. Furthermore, the Greek language continued in the Byzantine Empire long after Latin became the dominant language in the West.

Thousands of minuscules were produced in the Greek speaking Eastern region that was friendly to Christianity. The Western region was producing Latin copies of the New Testament and the Middle East and Africa were hostile to Christianity so the home of the Byzantine text was virtually the only place where Greek manuscripts were being copied for centuries.

The essence of the argument for the Byzantine text is the concept of "providential preservation" or that God must have ordained that what people were using as their Bible was consistent with that the original text must have been. Verses are cited such as "the Word of the Lord abides forever" (1 Peter 2:25); "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35); and "not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away" (Matthew 5:18).

However, the Bible doesn't tell us how this preservation would occur. Often, God's preservation is found in the remnant, not with the majority.

Also, the majority text has only been available for a few decades. For several centuries, the English speaking church used the King James Version, whose Greek text (Textus Receptus) differs from the Majority Text in almost 2,000 places.

For one thousand years before the King James Version the church in the west used the Vulgate, which is not based on the Byzantine text-type. Since the earliest copy of the Byzantine text-type is the fifth century (eight century for Paul's letters), it is apparent that the majority text was not the majority text for the first several centuries, and probably longer.

B. The Alexandrian text-type

The Alexandrian text-type is represented in nearly all of the papyri, including the most significant ones by volume, such as P46 (200 A.D.; most of Paul's letters), P66 (200 A.D.; most of John's Gospel) and P72 (200s A.D.; part of Luke and most of John)

The Alexandrian text-type is represented in the majority of the uncials (300-1000 A.D.) and largely found in the earlier uncials (300-600 A.D.).

The difficulty with the Alexandrian text-type is that it is centralized geographically near Egypt. This is because of the climate in North Africa that allowed for greater preservation of older manuscripts.

The perspective that the Alexandrian text-type did not remain dominant in the manuscripts as we observe later texts has led some to criticize it as being a discarded text. This once again misses the reason behind this, namely the church turning to the Latin text outside of the Byzantine Empire.

Another issue with the Alexandrian test-type is that it is not very uniform, with many variants existing within its various families. Therefore, is impossible to accept the Alexandrian text without frequently comparing the varieties of readings within this text-type.

C. The Western text-type

The Western text-type is not only weak because of its few textual witnesses. It is also difficult to accept as a base text because of its frequent conflations and fuller text readings.

The usefulness of the western text is as part of a comparison when doing the work of textual criticism.

7. The use of text-types

Recognizing the relationship between the ancient New Testament manuscripts greatly assists the practice of textual criticism and the attempt to evaluated the reading of the original text. It allows us to group texts into categories and weigh them against each other.

There are different schools of thought regarding how to use text-types in the process of determining the original text.

A. The Textus Receptus: Those who hold to the notion that the King James Version is the only inspired English Bible just look to the Greek text supporting that translation and stop. For these people, the text-types are irrelevant and are only a testament to inferior Greek texts that were discarded.

B. The Majority Text: The Majority Text view is that the variant that has the most manuscript support is the original text. This leads to the Byzantine text-type, but it does not completely do away with the task of textual criticism, since no manuscript is exactly identical. Also, even the Hodges-Farstad *Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* assumes some minority readings. And if all you do is simply count which reading has the most manuscript support, you must face the issue of what manuscripts you count since we keep finding more.

C. The Alexandrian text priority: The original text based upon textual criticism, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, published in 1881 by Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort, was based upon the view that the Alexandrian text-type had priority over the other text-types. This view ends up close to the practice of wherever Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus agree then this represents the original text.

D. An eclectic approach: There are various schools of thought within this approach but each variation looks at all the text-types and manuscript data in the process of determining the original text. They will have different emphases on how to weigh the evidence but all would believe the texts should be weighed and evaluated, not merely counted.

Next week we will continue to look at the practice of New Testament textual criticism by studying how the manuscripts are weighed and evaluated.

8. Application

"Acknowledge the sacrifice of others who have served us."