

The Byzantine Text of the Gospels: Recension or Process?¹

Klaus Wachtel, INTF

The separation of the terms “text-type” and “recension” by Ernest C. Colwell reflects a remarkable shift in envisaging the factors active in the New Testament manuscript tradition. In his famous 1961 essay “Method in Establishing the Nature of Text-Types”, he concluded:

“... we now recognize that the text-types developed, they grew, they are a process starting in the second century and proceeding by selection from available readings, from available ‘good, old manuscripts’, and proceeding also into new paths under local standards of excellence in syntax and in doctrine.” (Colwell, *Studies*, 45-55, here 52)

The term “text-type”, however, still carries along relics of the old division of the New Testament manuscript tradition into three or four “recensions”. If we take the whole evidence into account, a picture emerges that is far more complex. The external criteria applied when variants are assessed have to be re-defined accordingly.² To this end we have to focus on individual manuscripts and explore their relationships with other manuscripts. Assigning them to text-types has become obsolete.

You may ask, why then I am still referring to the “Byzantine text” myself. I am doing so, because the term aptly denominates the mainstream text form in the Byzantine empire. This mainstream has its headwaters in pre-Byzantine times, in fact in the very first phase of our manuscript tradition, and it underwent a long process of development and standardization. The final phase began with the introduction of the minuscule script in the 9th century and ended up in a largely uniform text characterized by readings attested by the majority of all Greek manuscripts from the 13th - 15th centuries counted by hundreds and thousands.

¹ Paper prepared for the NTTC session 23-327 at SBL 2009.

² See my “Towards a Redefinition of External Criteria: The Role of Coherence in Assessing the Origin of Variants”. In: H.A.G. Houghton and D.C. Parker (eds.), *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies?* (Texts and Studies 3rd ser. vol. 6) Gorgias Press: Piscataway 2008, 109-127.

Standardization means editorial activity, and in fact, a text form so similar to the late majority text as represented by Codex Alexandrinus cannot have emerged from a linear copying process without conscious editing. It is indeed likely that the text in Codex Alexandrinus is the result of editorial activity which may have been carried out in one or, more likely, several steps. Likewise, the text of the 6th century purple codices N 022 and Σ 042 certainly was not just copied from some manuscript picked at random. *Diorthosis*, correction, was an integral part of the copying process. Yet the assumption that a recension stood at the beginning of the formation of the Byzantine text and then penetrated the whole manuscript tradition reflects a categorically different view of the transmission history. I am going to focus on the differences between five manuscript texts to show that despite intense editorial activity the Byzantine majority text is the result of a process of reconciliation between different strands of transmission.

These are the manuscripts:

- A 02, Codex *Alexandrinus* (V), one of the few codices comprising the whole Bible. It was in the library of the Patriarch of Alexandria for centuries, hence its name, but probably was brought there from Constantinople by Athanasius II, Patriarch of Alexandria 1275/6-1316.³ The text of both OT and NT shows uneven characteristics. In the Gospels it comes relatively close to the late Byzantine text, while Acts, the Pauline and Catholic Letters and Revelation in 02 clearly show earlier text forms. 02 has a large number of singular readings, and the test passage collations show that it is not closely related to any other known manuscript.
- N 022 and Σ 042 (VI), Codices *Purpureus Patmensis et Petropolitanus* and *Purpureus Rossanensis*, the Gospels written on purple dyed parchment with silver ink. N is famous for its rich illuminations. Both manuscripts are likely to have been produced in Constantinople. Textually they are so similar that they may very well be copied from the same exemplar. Being so closely related they are treated like one text in the following. Like 02 these

³ Cp. T. C. Skeat, "The Provenance of the Codex Alexandrinus," *JTS* 6 (1955) 233-235.

manuscripts feature a large share of readings characteristic of the late Byzantine text. But they also support many readings differing from the Byzantine mainstream together with older witnesses.

- 01C^a (V-VII), one text form preserved in Codex *Sinaiticus*, reconstructed from the middle layer of its many corrections. The C^a corrections were carried out systematically, with a few exceptions throughout the entire Bible. Unfortunately the features of the corrector's script do not stand out clear enough to allow for more precise dating. At any rate, the text resulting from this revision can and should be treated as a stand-alone witness that deserves as much respect as the codex itself. The copy used by C^a was regarded worthy, after all, of serving as a corrective of a codex that showed all marks of high authority. Moreover, the diverse layers of correction in Codex Sinaiticus give us a clue as to what editorial activity looked like in the fifth-seventh centuries.
- Π 041 (IX), possibly the surviving archetype of the family named after Π, consisting of minuscules for the most part. It shows a state of text on the borderline between majuscule and minuscule transmission.
- 18 (XIV), a minuscule written in Constantinople in 1364, representing a large koiné group known as K^r since von Soden. Probably in the 12th century the editors of K^r made an attempt to overcome splits in the late Byzantine text. K^r readings typically have hundreds of witnesses, and they never are unique in the strict sense of the word.

For a first impression regarding the relationship of these witnesses to the Byzantine text, let us look at three later additions which will not be missing from any average copy of its fully developed form. These are the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16:9-20), the story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 7:53-8:11) and, less conspicuous, the bloody sweat episode on the mount of olives (Lk 22:43-44).

Characteristic later additions to the NT text

The first witness containing all three additions is Codex Bezae. This means that in the 5th century the three passages were already part of the tradition represented by this codex. The other witnesses of our selection containing all three additions are Π 041 and minuscule 18 from the 14th century, although in both manuscripts the pericope adulterae is marked with critical signs in part or as a whole. Codex Alexandrinus (02) contains only one of the additions, the longer ending of Mark. The first hand of Sinaiticus attests just the bloody sweat episode. But C^a deletes it, thus establishing a situation found also in Codex Vaticanus: none of the additions are incorporated. Then Cb2, the other corrector who reworked the Sinaiticus New Testament systematically, retracts C^a's deletion. The purple codices N 022 and Σ 042 have the longer ending of Mark but not yet the *pericope adulterae* and the bloody sweat episode. All this shows how instable characteristic features of the later Byzantine text still were in the 5th/6th centuries.

The fresh evidence I am referring to now comes from a research project designed to complement our test passage collations of the Synoptic Gospels and to study the influence of textual parallels on the formation of variants. The working title of the project is "Parallel Pericopes". 38 synoptic pericopes in 154 manuscripts were collated in full. The selection includes all 46 manuscripts differing from the majority text at least at 15% of the test passages of two Synoptic Gospels. The other end of the scale is represented by 29 manuscripts differing from the majority text at less than 5% of the test passages of two Synoptic Gospels. Then there are 75 manuscripts from between these extremes, differing from the majority text at 15-5% of the test passages of two Synoptic Gospels.

The results of these collations are now stored in a database ready for evaluation. In this table I ordered the manuscripts according to their proportion of majority readings in our parallel pericopes.

[Parallel Pericopes: proportion of majority readings](#)

First row: running number of entries, second row: GA number, third row: Percentages and absolute numbers of majority readings relating to the number of relevant variant passages covered by the respective witness.⁴

Very near the top of the table we see 18, representing the Kr edition. Other members of this group included in “Parallel Pericopes” are 35, 1328, 1334 and 1339. They represent more than 200 members of this group that agree more with each other than with the majority text at the test passages in the Synoptic Gospels. This large group is the result of an attempt to finally establish the text of the church, especially at passages where the Byzantine witness is split. Here we have reached the Byzantine text in its purest form, although you see that it does not represent the majority text at a 100%. In fact, there is no manuscript in our selection that does, although we tried hard to include several that looked promising in this respect. Ironically, the majority text, like the initial text, is an eclectic entity. At least I have not yet found one manuscript that contains *all* the majority readings of a NT writing, although there are very many witnesses that come close to the 100%.

From 18 we have to scroll down 35 positions to reach II 041, a text from the time of the transition to the new minuscule script. It agrees with the MT at 94.6%. If we compare it with 18 [\[Tables\]](#), we see that they both agree with the MT at 92.1% or 1226 out of 1331 variant passages in “Parallel Pericopes”. 18 agrees with the MT at 66 passages where 041 does not. On the other hand, there are 10 passages where 041 agrees with the majority reading against 18.

02, Codex Alexandrinus, is another 29 positions farther away from the top of the list, agreeing with the MT at 92.4%. If we compare 02 with 041 [\[Tables\]](#), we find them both in agreement with the MT at 87.9% or 850 out of 967 variant passages. (The absolute figures are relatively low, because 02 lacks most of the Gospel of Matthew.) There are 66 passages, where one of them agrees with the MT against the other. In 28 instances 02 has the majority

⁴ “Relevant variant passages” here means passages where the majority reading could be clearly determined. At 26 out of a total of 1404 variant passages in our parallel pericopes the Byzantine witness is split into two or three branches of about equal size.

reading while 041 has not, and there are 38 such instances, where 041 has it but 02 has not.

The gap separating 02 from the purple codices is even larger. Their running numbers in the Byzantine text table are 80 and 85. 02 and the merged text of the purple codices [Tables] both agree with the MT at 85.1% or 635 out of 746 variant passages.⁵ 02 attests the majority reading in 42 instances where the purple codices do not, and the purple codices agree with the MT against 02 at 32 passages.

Scrolling farther down the Byzantine text table we have to pass the NA27 text to reach the result of a major revision of the entire text of the Bible in Codex Sinaiticus, 01C^a. Let me mention in passing that NA27 is close to the bottom of the list, but a proportion of 85.7% majority readings in a text not known for any partiality in favor of the Byzantine text is worth a remark. It means that the manuscript transmission as a whole features a high degree of continuity and coherence. At most of thousands of variant passages (at more than 85% according to NA27) the text of a broad mainstream of manuscripts is identical with the initial text.

The revised text of Codex Sinaiticus is even closer to the bottom of the table. C^a is one of two correctors who reworked the whole New Testament text of Codex Sinaiticus systematically, including previous corrections. This means that where the text of the first hand or a previous correction was left unchanged, it was approved by C^a. As a result, the distance of Sinaiticus, as corrected by C^a, from the MT in our 38 synoptic pericopes decreases by 4 percentage points. To be sure, 82% is not very much in comparison with the share of 92.4% majority readings found in Alexandrinus (02) in the fifth century already. It brings the Sinaiticus text just to the level of Vaticanus (03) with a share of 81.1%. The trend becomes clearer, if we focus on the passages where C^a corrected the first hand text or accepted a correction of a predecessor. There is a total of 110 corrections carried out or accepted by C^a. 75 (or 68.2%)

⁵ If there is a difference between 022 and 042 where one of them agrees with the MT, the instance was counted as an agreement of 022/042, because it appears likely that at such passages the majority reading was in the exemplar.

of them are towards the majority text. But it would be an exaggeration to say that the corrections bring Sinaiticus into accordance with *the* Byzantine text. All we can state on this basis is a tendency towards rather than away from the mainstream. Yet for our disquisition it is important to note that a systematic revision of a representative Bible manuscript carried out contemporaneously with or later than the production of Codex Alexandrinus is so far behind in terms of convergence with the textform dominating the transmission from the 9th century.

Conclusions

The Byzantine text is by no means a fixed and stable entity that remained more or less the same from the times of Codex Alexandrinus through the middle ages.

On the other hand it is a fact that the Synoptic Gospels in Codex Alexandrinus already contain a high share of readings characteristic of the late Byzantine majority text. Comparison with the Kr text shows that 02, regardless of considerable further development, represents a strand of transmission that was known and alive in Constantinople after the introduction of the new script. Yet it did not dominate the manuscript tradition to a degree comparable with the situation after the *μεταχαρακτηρισμός*, the introduction of the minuscule script in the 9th century. This is shown not only by the lack of later Byzantine readings in the systematic revision of Codex Sinaiticus, but also by a comparison of Alexandrinus with the purple codices 022 and 042. The unique readings and distinct linguistic features shared by the latter show that their text, too, was not copied at random but probably established as carefully as the C^a text of Codex Sinaiticus.

The Byzantine text as found in the majority of Greek manuscripts from the 13th to the 15th century is the result of a process starting together with the manuscript tradition itself. Although this process was advanced by editorial activity, it was not steered and controlled by a central institution like the

Patriarchate of Constantinople. A marked feature of the process before the 9th century is movement towards the stage found in late Byzantine manuscripts, but the development was not homogeneous and consistent. There was a growing pool of majority readings, i.e. readings shared by the majority of manuscripts in all phases of the transmission history, but the proportion of such readings in manuscripts of the same time is quite different.

To perceive the traits of the emergence of the Byzantine text realistically is of great methodological importance. The notion of an early Lucianic recension leading to the imperial Byzantine text has largely been abandoned already, but the value judgement combined with it in eclectic NTTC has not. A more discriminating perception of the Byzantine transmission has to deal with relationships between variants and manuscripts, regardless of whether they used to be or still are labeled “Byzantine”.