

# GREEK NEW TESTAMENT TEXT-TYPES AND EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the different text types in which the Greek New Testament was written and their individual characteristics that distinguish one text-type from another. There are three major text types that can be enumerated here: the Byzantine, the Alexandrian and the Western text-type. It also concentrates upon the earliest translations of the Greek New Testament. The following are can be enumerated here: Old Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic.

## 1. GREEK NEW TESTAMENT TEXT-TYPES

Saifullah (2000)<sup>1</sup> observes that in the early centuries of the expansion of Christian Churches the “local texts” of the New Testament gradually developed and started to be more and more different from one another. In and near the large cities such as Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Carthage, Constantinople, and a number of others, the newly established Churches were provided with the copies of the scriptures in such forms that were current in these areas. When Christianity was expanding, it was necessary to produce additional copies of manuscripts in order to keep up the pace with the demand, and in this way the number of special readings and renderings from a given locality would be both preserved, reinforced and spread. Nowadays a total of 127 papyri manuscripts are known, the oldest of them being labeled P52 2, and 299 uncial (i.e. majuscule) parchment and velum<sup>3</sup> manuscripts, which date from 4th through 10th centuries. As regards the original manuscripts of the New Testament books, on the basis of which the later copies of manuscripts were produced, they were most likely written on papyrus, but unfortunately 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.

Modern scholars have identified the characteristics typical of the different manuscripts and classified them accordingly. Although it was often the case that mixed varieties of manuscripts appeared, the tendency to develop and preserve a peculiar type of the text prevailed in the earliest manuscripts over the tendencies leading to a mixture of texts. Following Metzger

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1 <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Bible/Text/Mss/textype.html>

2 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).

3 The difference between parchment and velum 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.

(1971), Saifullah (2000) describes some of the most important distinctive kinds of the New Testament texts. As the first one, he mentions the Alexandrian text-type, sometimes referred to as "neutral". This text is normally regarded as the best and the most faithful one in preserving the original. The Alexandrian text is represented chiefly by Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. According to Sitterly (1995), Codex Sinaiticus, or Codex  $\kappa$  (01), dates to the 4th century and it was found by Constantin Tischendorf at St. Catherine Monastery on Mt. Sinai and first published in Tischendorf (1862). Codex Sinaiticus is the only uncial (i.e. majuscule manuscript) 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. As regards Codex Vaticanus, or Codex B (03), 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 columns. It 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 underwent numerous changes introduced by later scribes. The first edition of the manuscript that was published 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). As the second text-type, Saifullah (2000) mentions the Western one, which was widely present in Italy, Gaul, North Africa, as well as in other regions (including Egypt). Its presence in Egypt is shown by papyri P38 (about A.D. 300) and P48 (about the end of the 3rd century), whereas the most important Greek manuscripts that displays the Western text is Codex Bezae, or Codex D (05). According to Sitterly (1995), 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 written in one column, 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 first readings of the manuscript appeared in the margin of Estienne (1550) and then in Beza's notes (1565). However, the text was first presented in full by Kipling (1793)<sup>1</sup>. The characteristic features of the Western text-type are the fondness of paraphrase and omission of words and passages. Next in a row is the Caesarean text-type, which seems to have originated in Egypt and then brought over to Caesarea; it is attested, among others, by the papyrus P45. Saifullah (2000) says that this text-type was used by Cyril and by Armenians and then Georgians. Moreover, it is an eastern text dating from the early third century, and is characterized by the fact that it mixes Western with Alexandrian readings. Finally, the fourth text-type is the Byzantine text-type, which is also referred to as the Syrian text, the Koine text, the Ecclesiastical text, or the Antiochian text. It is regarded as the latest of the several distinctive text-types of the New Testament and it is characterized chiefly by lucidity and completeness, and by the fact that it often combines two or more divergent readings into one expanded reading, and harmonizes divergent parallel passages. This text was probably produced at Antioch in Syria and was then taken to Constantinople, from where it was distributed widely throughout the Byzantine Empire. The best representative of this text-type is the Codex Alexandrinus, or Codex A (02). 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 and arranged in two columns, 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 Solomon.

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

The Byzantine text-type was generally thought of as authoritative and thus it was one of the most widely circulated and accepted. Therefore, after the invention of the printing press, it became the standard form of the New Testament in printed editions. Witherington (1998) notes that the vast majority of scholars are in agreement that the Byzantine text is a later text type combining many of the distinctive features and readings of earlier textual traditions. Since the text is represented in the vast majority of manuscripts from the fifth century on, it is given the common name of “the Majority Text”.

## 2. THE EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

The earliest and most important (for textual criticism) translations of the Greek New Testament are those in Old Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic. The first Syriac translation was based on the Diatessaron, an early Greek version of the four Gospels which were compiled as a single narrative text by Tatian the Assyrian around the year 150 AD, and it was very popular in the early Syriac Church. Unfortunately, the Syriac translation of the Diatessaron is lost, except a few verses used as citation by the Church Fathers. Nevertheless, as Koester (2000) notes, a new Syriac translation, but this time of the four Gospels treated separately, appeared as early as the end of the second century. This Old Syriac version of the Greek text of the Gospels is preserved in two manuscripts, namely Codex Syrus Curetonianus (from the 5th century) and Codex Syrus Sinaiticus (from the 4th century). It is certain that the Old Syriac translation was based on a Greek manuscript representing the Western text family, and therefore the Old Syriac translation confirms that the Western type of Greek was widely distributed geographically and used in the second century, and thus it should, next to the papyri and the great uncials of the 4th and 5th centuries, be considered seriously as a witness to a very early text type. There was also a third early Syriac translation of the New Testament, referred to as the Peshitta, a standard version of the Bible among a number of other Syriac texts, which was developed gradually on the basis of the Old Syriac translation starting from the year 435 CE. The Peshitta served as a basis of a later Syriac edition of the New Testament called Philoxenia, and this name derives from bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug, who in the year 508 requested his suffragan bishop Polycarpus to make a new translation. As far as Latin translation of the Greek New Testament is concerned, Koester (2002) notes that it was already known in North Africa (in modern Tunisia) at the end of the second century, which was the center of Latin-speaking Christianity at that time. This translation was later used in a revised form in Italy and other western countries in which Latin was spoken, and it is known as the *Vetus Latina*, i.e. Old Latin, also referred to as *Itala*. There are thirty two manuscripts of *Vetus Latina* and they were written from the 5th to the 13th century. The oldest gospel manuscript with the European text of the *Vetus Latina* is the Codex Vercellensis dating from the 5th century, whereas the Codex Veronensis represents the text used by Jerome for his revision that became the Vulgate (i.e. the ‘common’ translation), which is a late 4th century translation of the Bible. Seeing the lack of uniformity among the representatives of the Old Latin versions that were circulating in the West, Pope Damasus entrusted Jerome in 382 CE with the task of producing a new edition of the Latin Bible, which took him 20 years. Jerome having completing the task, the Vulgate, which was produced on the basis of a comparison with Greek texts being in circulation at that time, became the standard version of the Roman Catholic Church and nowadays there are more than eight thousand manuscripts based on it. Moreover, the Old Latin manuscripts, like the Old Syriac ones, on the whole represent the Western text-type. As regards the Coptic translations, they are other early versions of the New Testament. Koester (2000) says that during the early Christian period a number of Coptic dialects were spoken in Egypt, all of which derived from ancient Egyptian. Out of these dialects, Bohairic and Sahidic were the most important. The oldest translation, dating from the early 3rd century, was in Sahidic and it was based on a Greek text closely related to the Alexandrian text-type, which also contains a number of Western readings. A later Coptic translation is Bohairic, and its oldest known manuscript dates from the 4th century. It is interesting to note that Bohairic was, and still is, the official language of the Coptic Church and that, as is the case with the Sahidic text, the Bohairic text predominantly represents the Alexandrian text-type. As regards the oldest translation of the New Testament into a Germanic language, Koester (2002) notes that it is the Gothic Bible which at the same time is the oldest surviving document in any of the Germanic languages. The

translation was done in the middle of the 4th century as part of the translation of the entire Bible by Wulfila (or Ulfilas), a Cappadocian Christian, who had been deported by the Goths together with his family. He produced the translation for Gothic Christians inhabiting the region of Moesia on the lower Danube River. An incomplete text of Wulfila's Gothic version of the New Testament is preserved in the famous Codex Argenteus, which was produced in the 5th or 6th century in the north of Italy and is now kept in Uppsala. The material that was used for writing the Gothic Bible was purple parchment decorated with silver and gold ink. As regards the other manuscripts of the Gothic Bible, almost all of them are palimpsests, and they preserve nearly every book of the New Testament. The Gothic Bible is said to be an almost literal translation of the Greek New Testament, and more specifically of the Byzantine text-type which served as the translation basis. Nevertheless, the Gothic text contains many Western readings, but it is not exactly certain whether these readings were part of the original translation or were just introduced later on during the time when the Goths stayed in northern Italy. As far as translation into Armenian is concerned, Koester (2000) notes that the oldest one was done around 400 CE and there are more than a thousand manuscripts of the early translation, the oldest being from the year 887. It is not exactly known whether the Armenian translation was based on a Greek text or on a Syriac text, which was later on compared with a Greek text and revised accordingly in the 8th century. The text-type represented by the Armenian translations seems to be more related to the Caesarean text, rather than to the Byzantine one. On the other hand, the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Georgian translation date to the 9th century and they most likely represent a secondary translation based on the Caesarean family, as was the case with the Armenian version. However, Christianity arrived to the Georgians living at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains as early as in the 5th century. Finally, the Ethiopic translation, which was probably done as early as in the 4th century, is most likely based on a Syriac translation of a Greek text, and its oldest surviving manuscript dates to the 13th century. Moreover, the Ethiopic translation on the whole is representative of the Byzantine text family. Koester (2000) also notes that there are other ancient translations of the New Testament, like for example into Nubian, Sogdian, Anglo-Saxon, Arabic and Persian, but they are of little significance for the textual criticism, as they are all not made on the basis of the original Greek but rather on the basis of other translations. To cap it all, Black (1994:21) notes that "It is important to understand that the autographs and early copies of the Greek New Testament were written in ancient style. There were no spaces between words, no punctuation marks, and no paragraph divisions. Occasionally the lack of spaces between words could make an important difference. [Therefore], translators of the earliest copies had to decide where to divide words, where to begin and end sentences, and where to put punctuation. Unfortunately, some of their choices were wrong."

### 3. CONCLUSION

This article is far from being a thorough and exhaustive study of the subject, as it is but a mere introduction to the subject of the different text-types of the Greek New Testament and the earliest translations of it, as well as to the subject of Biblical textual criticism. According to Sitterly (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 velum. In the present day, 299 uncials are known and they all date from 4th through 10th centuries. The most important Greek uncials are: 1. Codex Sinaiticus, representing the Alexandrian text-type, 2. Codex Alexandrinus, representing the Byzantine text-type, 3. Codex Vaticanus, representing the Alexandrian text-type, and 4. Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, representing the Western text-type. Although the original papyrus manuscripts were lost at an early date, numerous copies were made and used among the Christian communities. The copies were basically made in Greek but a number of

translations into other languages started to appear also from an early date on. The most important early translations of the Greek New Testament were made into such languages as Old Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic.

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