

The Stream of Transmission

Now then, what sort of a picture may we expect to find in the surviving witnesses on the assumption that the history of the transmission of the New Testament Text was predominantly normal? We may expect a broad spectrum of copies, showing minor differences due to copying mistakes but all reflecting one common tradition. The simultaneous existence of abnormal transmission in the earliest centuries would result in a sprinkling of copies, helter-skelter, outside of that main stream. The picture would look something like Figure C.

The MSS within the cones represent the "normal" transmission. To the left I have plotted some possible representatives of what we might style the "irresponsible" transmission of the text—the copyists produced poor copies through incompetence or carelessness but did not make deliberate changes. To the right I have plotted some possible representatives of what we might style the "fabricated" transmission of the text—the scribes made deliberate changes in the text (for whatever reasons), producing fabricated copies, not true copies. I am well aware that the MSS plotted on the figure above contain both careless and deliberate errors, in different proportions (7Q5,4,8 and P52,64,67 are too fragmentary to permit the classification of their errors as deliberate rather than careless), so that any classification such as I attempt here must be relative and gives a distorted picture. Still, I venture to insist that ignorance, carelessness, officiousness and malice all left their mark upon the transmission of the New Testament text, and we must take account of them in any attempt to reconstruct the history of that transmission.

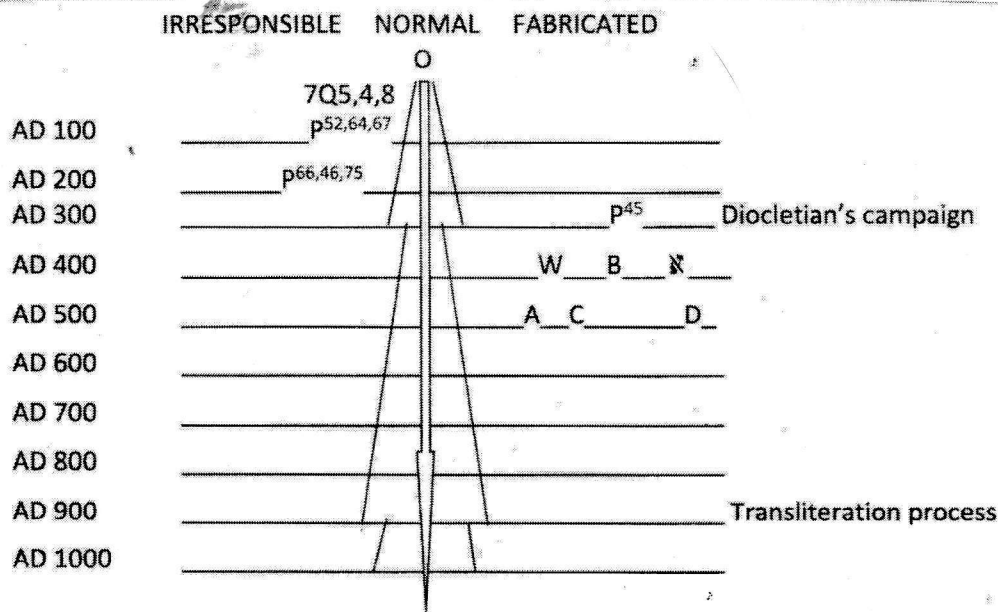


Figure C

As the figure suggests, I argue that Diocletian's campaign had a purifying effect upon the stream of transmission. In order to withstand torture rather than give up your MS(S), you would have to be a truly committed believer, the sort of person who would want good copies of the Scriptures. Thus it was probably the more contaminated MSS that were destroyed, in the main, leaving the purer MSS to replenish the earth.¹

¹ For a fuller discussion of this point please see the section "Imperial repression of the N.T." in Chapter 6 of my book, *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV.*, available from Amazon.com as well as from my site, www.prunch.org.

The arrow within the cones represents Family 35 (see Part II below). Another consideration suggests itself—if, as reported, the Diocletian campaign was most fierce and effective in the Byzantine area, the numerical advantage of the 'Byzantine' texttype over the 'Western' and 'Alexandrian' would have been reduced, giving the latter a chance to forge ahead. But it did not happen. The Church, in the main, refused to propagate those forms of the Greek text.

What we find upon consulting the witnesses is just such a picture. We have the Majority Text (Aland), or the Traditional Text (Burton), dominating the stream of transmission with a few individual witnesses going their idiosyncratic ways. In Chapter 4 of my *Identity IV*, I demonstrate that the notion of 'text-types' and recensions, as defined and used by Hort and his followers, is gratuitous. Epp's notion of 'streams' fares no better. There is just one stream, with a number of small eddies along the edges.¹ When I say the Majority Text dominates the stream, I mean it is represented in about 95% of the MSS.²

Actually, such a statement is not altogether satisfactory because it does not allow for the mixture or shifting affinities encountered within individual MSS. A better, though more cumbersome, way to describe the situation would be something like this: 100% of the MSS agree as to, say, 50% of the Text; 99% agree as to another 40%; over 95% agree as to another 4%; over 90% agree as to another 2%; over 80% agree as to another 2%; only for 2% or so of the Text do less than 80% of the MSS agree, and a disproportionate number of those cases occur in Revelation.³ And the membership of the dissenting group varies from reading to reading.⁴ Still, with the above reservation, one may reasonably speak of up to 95% of the extant MSS belonging to the Majority textual tradition.

I see no way of accounting for a 95% (or 90%) domination unless that text goes back to the Autographs. Hort saw the problem and invented a revision. Sturz seems not to have seen the problem. He demonstrates that the "Byzantine text-type" is early and independent of the "Western" and "Alexandrian text-types", and like von Soden, wishes to treat them as three equal witnesses.⁵ But if the three "text-types" were equal, how could the so-called "Byzantine" ever gain a 90-95% preponderance?

The argument from statistical probability enters here with a vengeance. Not only do the extant MSS present us with one text form enjoying a 95% majority, but the remaining 5% do not represent a single competing text form. The minority MSS disagree as much (or more) among themselves as they do with the majority.

¹ One might speak of a P45,W eddy or a P75,B eddy, for example.

² Although I used, of necessity, the term 'text-type' in some of my writings, I view the Majority Text as being much broader. It is a textual tradition which might be said to include a number of related 'text-types', such as von Soden's Ka, Ki, and Kl. I wish to emphasize again that it is only agreement in error that determines genealogical relationships. It follows that the concepts of 'genealogy' and 'text-type' are irrelevant with reference to original readings—they are only useful (when employed properly) for identifying spurious readings. Well, if there is a family that very nearly reflects the original its 'profile' or mosaic of readings will distinguish it from other families, but most of those readings will not be errors (the competing variants distinctive of other families will be errors).

³ I am not prepared to defend the precise figures used, they are guesses, but I believe they represent a reasonable approximation to reality. I heartily agree with Colwell when he insists that we must "rigorously eliminate the singular reading" ("External Evidence and New Testament Criticism", *Studies in the History of the Text of the New Testament*, ed. B.L. Daniels and M.J. Suggs [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1967], p. 8) on the altogether reasonable assumption (it seems to me) that a solitary witness against the world cannot possibly be right.

⁴ I will of course be reminded that witnesses are to be weighed, not counted; for my discussion of that point please see the section "Should not witnesses be weighed, rather than counted?" in Chapter 6 of my *Identity IV*.

⁵ Sturz, *Op. Cit.* A text produced by taking two 'text-types' against one would move the UBS text about 80% of the distance toward the Majority text.