

BUT ARE THE VARIANTS ALL REAL?

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The edition of the Greek New Testament used by most academics across the world is now the Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th edition, German Bible Society, 1993). As well as presenting a reconstruction of what the editors think is approximately the original text of the Greek New Testament it also presents a wealth of information about manuscripts and about variations within them. Now there can be little doubt that manuscripts of the New Testament often show variation amongst themselves. However, what scholars have been less ready to note is that some of the variants which have attracted their attention are not in fact real. This may sound like a rather strange claim. After all, are scholars really incapable of telling us when manuscripts vary and when they do not? One might be excused for having thought so. However, there is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that even this task may have been a little too taxing for the scholarly community.

On most pages of the Nestle-Aland edition about a third to a fifth of the page is taken up with a listing of manuscript variations. The pattern that the list of variants at the bottom of the page (known as the

apparatus=) follows is to cite a variation and thereafter to list manuscripts that give that variation. First the apparatus cites Greek manuscripts, then translations (especially into Latin, Syriac and Coptic) and finally lists church fathers. The information initially appears factual enough and yet upon closer inspection a number of problems begin to emerge. At almost every point there is room for bias. The selection of which Greek manuscripts to list is a rather obvious case of when this can occur. The church fathers are also often listed rather selectively. However, the problem that I have observed occurring most frequently is the biased and inaccurate reporting of the early translations (often called versions=) of the New Testament.

The problem with use of the early versions of the New Testament is that by definition they are not in Greek. For a scholar to be able to say that a version supports this or that variant they must be able to translate the version accurately back into Greek. This is obviously an area where our human tendency to err can show itself. The secular mindset that has so pervaded modern textual criticism of the New Testament has proven itself rather inadequate at restraining the overconfidence of humans in their ability to carry out a task without error. Thus the textual apparatus of the Nestle-Aland edition, like many editions of the last century or so, ends up presenting us with a number of variants that on closer inspection turn out not to be real at all.

In this context it is necessary to spare some of the technical details, but I hope just briefly to illustrate how some of the variations in this illustrious edition of the Greek New Testament are nothing but the invention of scholars. A rather prominent case occurs in Matthew 1:16. There the Nestle-Aland edition notes a fourfold variety in wording, supporting in this case the best text (which is also found in the *Textus Receptus*).¹ The point to note here, however, is that according to Nestle-Aland there were four different Greek forms of the text that circulated in the early church. Nevertheless, when we look at the manuscripts that they suggest have these four different forms of the text we find that two of the variations they mention are only

supported by Syriac witnesses. In other words, two forms of the Greek = text they give are supported by no Greek witnesses but represent scholars = attempts to translate Syriac back into Greek.

Now one of these two readings only preserved in Syriac has created a certain amount of scholarly

excitement, since, translated literally, it seems to suggest that Joseph begat Jesus (i.e. was our Lord = s literal father). Scholars who have been looking for some alternative to the virginal conception have therefore been rather attracted by this variant. Such scholars often like to believe that the earliest form of an account in the New Testament lacked miraculous elements that were only added as the naïve early believers retold and elaborated the story. One scholar, Hermann Freiherr von Soden, was so taken with this variant that, when he produced his edition of the Greek New Testament, he translated the Syriac back into Greek and printed this

reading (with not a shred of support from Greek manuscripts) as his main text.ⁱⁱ After all, he thought, what is more likely than that stories like the virginal conception only arose well after Christianity had begun?

There are many fallacies with this way of thinking, but the one that I would like to point out here is that in fact the whole of von Soden's reasoning was founded on a faulty premise. Further investigation of the translation method of the Syriac version in question only revealed that the Syriac translator had produced his rendering by a rather thoughtless, but easily made, slip in translation.ⁱⁱⁱ There never was a Greek text that failed to tell us of the virginal conception!

However, this is not the only place where the Nestle-Aland edition presents us with a variant for which there is no Greek support and which, on closer inspection, appears just to be a figment of scholarly imagination. They record Greek variants based only on Syriac in Matthew 2:15 and 3:15 and then a variant with only Syriac and Coptic support in Matthew 4:3.^{iv} Careful consideration of their apparatus throughout the New Testament reveals literally dozens of such cases where a variant Greek text has been presumed to lie behind a variation of wording in a translation. What has not been adequately done by scholars is a thorough study of how the translators of the early versions went about their translations and of exactly how reliably they carried out their task. Consideration of how translators acted will only serve to show that there has been less variation in Greek manuscripts than is commonly supposed.

The wrong use of the versions within the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament, as in other critical editions of the Greek New Testament, has the effect of making the way the text of the New Testament has been handed down to us look more varied than it in fact is. The problem of the scholarly treatment of early translations of the Bible is not, however, new. Centuries ago, the great Puritan John Owen had to engage in debate with those who suggested that the early versions of the Bible contained a multitude of variations not attested in Greek manuscripts.^v Though the scholars with whom Owen contended undoubtedly surpassed him in grasp of the relevant languages the reverent caution that Owen showed about the use of the versions has, in fact, stood the test of time rather better than it seemed in Owen's day. What is needed now is for believing scholars with the same caution to master the relevant languages and disciplines and show to the world the integrity with which the Scriptures have been given to us.

i. ¹ How we know what the 'best text' is? My approach would be to emphasise the 'givenness' of God's word. God has acted and provided his word for us. This contrasts with secular approaches which emphasise the need for human reconstruction of the text (scholars use their critical faculties, applied to variety of manuscripts, and then recommend what is best). Our approach should rather be to look for what God has given, which by definition must be available in sources that do not require human speculation to be accessed. In the case of Matthew 1:16 there can be no question. All carefully copied manuscripts and carefully printed editions have the same reading.

ii. H.F. von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (4 volumes; Göttingen, 1911¹⁸³).

iii. I have argued this in technical detail in P.J. Williams, *Early Syriac Translation Technique and the Textual Criticism of the Greek Gospels* (Piscataway, 2004). pp. 240¹⁸⁴.

iv.

I show how Nestle-Aland's use of versions is questionable in Matthew 2:15 (Williams, *Early Syriac Translation Technique*, pp. 147¹⁸⁹), in Matthew 3:15 (*ibid.*, pp. 275¹⁸⁶) and in Matthew 4:3 (Williams, *On the Representation of Sahidic within the Apparatus of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece**, *Journal of Coptic Studies* 8 [2006] forthcoming).

v. Some of this debate can be seen in Owen's *On the Divine Original of the Scriptures* (Works of John Owen vol. 16; The Banner of Truth Trust).