

Sunday, April 14, 2019— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 84 Normal Transmission: Application of the Four Controlling Factors

Introduction

- In [Lesson 83](#) we continued our discussion of “normal transmission” by considering the four controlling factors identified by Dr. Wilbur N. Pickering in *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV*:
 - *Access to the autographs*—“On the face of it, we may reasonably assume that in the earliest period of the transmission of the N.T. text the most reliable copies would be circulating in the region that held the Autographs. . . So, in the year 200 someone looking for the best text of the N.T. would presumably go the Aegean area [2/3 of the autographic text was originally sent to churches or individuals in this geographic region]; certainly not to Egypt [No autographs were sent here].” (Pickering, 103)
 - *Proficiency in the source language*—“For a faithful transmission to occur the copyists had to be proficient in Greek, and over the long haul. So where was Greek predominant? Evidently in Greece and Asia Minor; Greek is the mother tongue of Greece to this day (having changed considerably during the intervening centuries, as any living language must). The dominance of Greek in the Aegean area was guaranteed by the Byzantine Empire for many centuries; in fact, until the invention of printing. Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453; the Gutenberg Bible (Latin) was printed just three years later, while the first printed Greek New Testament appeared in 1516. . . Again, the Aegean Area is far and away the best qualified to transmit the Text with confidence and integrity. Note that even if Egypt had started out with a good text, already by the end of the 2nd century its competence to transmit the text was steadily deteriorating. In fact, the early papyri (they come from Egypt) are demonstrably inferior in quality, taken individually, as well as exhibiting rather different types of text (they disagree among themselves).” (Pickering, 104)
 - *Strength of the church*—“But we need to pause to reflect on the implication of Aland’s statements. He was a champion of the Egyptian (“Alexandrian”) text-type, and yet he himself informs us that up to A.D. 200 the textual tradition in Egypt could not be trusted and that by 200 the use of the Greek had virtually died out there. So, on what basis can he argue that the Egyptian text subsequently became the best? Aland also states that in the 2nd century, 3rd century, and into the 4th century Asia Minor continued to be “the heartland of the Church.” This means that the superior qualifications of the Aegean area to protect, transmit, and attest the N.T. Text carry over into the 4th century! It happens that Hort, Metzger, and Aland (along with many others) have linked the “Byzantine” text-type to Lucian of Antioch, who died in 311. Now really, would a text produced by a leader in “the heartland of the church” be better than whatever evolved in Egypt? Of course, I ask the above question to point out their inconsistency. The “Byzantine” text-type existed long before Lucian.” (Pickering, 106)
 - Romans 3:1-2—seems to offer Biblical support to the notion that the churches of the Aegean region were strong precisely because two thirds of the autographic

text of the New Testament had been addressed to assemblies and individuals in that region.

- *Appropriate attitude toward the text*—“Antiochians began insisting upon the literal interpretation of Scripture. The point is that a literalist is obliged to be concerned about the precise wording of text since his interpretation or exegesis hinges upon it. It is reasonable to assume that this “literalist” mentality would have influenced the churches of Asia Minor and Greece and encouraged them in the careful and faithful transmission of the pure text that they had received. For example, the 1,000 MSS of the Syriac Peshitta are unparalleled for their consistency. . . Since Philo of Alexandria was at the height of his influence when the first Christians arrived there, it may be that his allegorical interpretation of the O.T. began to rub off on the young church already in the first century. Since an allegorist is going to impose his own ideas on the text anyway, he would presumably have fewer inhibitions about altering it—precise wording would not be a priority.” (Pickering, 107-108)
- In answer to the question of who was best qualified to transmit the Biblical text, the four controlling factors of; 1) access to the autographs, 2) proficiency in the source language, 3) strength of the church, and 4) attitude toward the text point in the direction of the Aegean rim, the territory that later comprised the Byzantine Empire.
 - “The Aegean area was the best qualified to protect, transmit, and attest the true text of the N.T. writings. This was true in the 2nd century; it was true in the 3rd century; it continued to be true in the 4th century.” (Pickering 108)
- In this Lesson we will look at how these four controlling factors contributed to the “normal” transmission of scripture. In order to accomplish this task, we will consider the following:
 - Normal Transmission
 - Abnormal Transmission

Normal Transmission

- Regarding the question of whether the transmission of the New Testament text was “normal,” Pickering says that the answer is yes and no.
 - “Assuming the faithful were persons of at least average integrity and intelligence they would have produced reasonable copies of the manuscripts they had received from the previous generation, persons who they trusted being assured that they were transmitting the true text. There would be accidental copying mistakes in their work, but no deliberate changes. But there were others who expressed an interest in the New Testament writings, persons lacking in integrity, who made their own copies with malicious intent. There would be accidental mistakes in their work too, but also deliberate alteration of the text. I will trace first the normal transmission.” (Pickering, 108)

- Pickering’s argument for “normal transmission” draws on many of the points we have observed in Lesson [82](#) and [83](#).
 - “We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the New Testament writings from the start—had they not they would have been rejecting the authority of the Apostles, and hence not been among the faithful. To a basic honesty would be added vigilance, since the Apostles had repeatedly and emphatically warned them against false teachers.” (Pickering, 108)
- Asia Minor and Eastern Europe were in the best position to transmit and authenticate the *pure text*. This led to the numerical superiority (i.e., the multiplicity of copies demanded by the doctrine of preservation) and entrenchment of the Byzantine form of the text in the area surrounding the Aegean Sea, the precise geographic location where two thirds of the autographs were originally sent.
 - “With an ever-increasing demand and consequent proliferation of copies throughout the Graeco-Roman world and with the potential for verifying copies by having recourse to the centers still possessing the Autographs, the early textual situation was presumably highly favorable to the wide dissemination of MSS in close agreement with the original text. By the early years of the second century the dissemination of such copies can reasonably be expected to have been very widespread, with the logical consequences that the form of the text they embodied would early become entrenched throughout the area of their influence.” (Pickering, 109)
- Next, Dr. Pickering uses the “science of statistical probability” to demonstrate how a text form proliferated under these circumstances would be difficult to dislodge from its dominant position.
 - “The considerations just cited [see the quotations above] are crucial to an adequate understanding of the history of the transmission of the text because they indicate that a basic trend was established at the very beginning—a trend that would continue inexorably until the advent of a printed N.T. text. I say “inexorably” because, given a normal process of transmission, the science of statistical probability demonstrates that a text form in such circumstances could scarcely be dislodged from its dominant position—the probabilities against a competing text form ever achieving a majority attestation would be prohibitive no matter how many generations of MSS there might be. It would take an extraordinary upheaval in the transmissional history to give currency to an aberrant text form. We know of no place in history that will accommodate such an upheaval.

The argument from probability would apply to secular writings as well as the New Testament and does not take into account any unusual concern for purity of text. I have argued, however, that the early Christians did have a special concern for their Scriptures and that this concern accompanied the spread of Christianity. Thus, Irenaeus clearly took his concern for textual purity (which extended to a single letter) to Gaul and undoubtedly influenced Christians in that area. The point is that the text of the N.T. Autographs had a big advantage over that of any secular literature, so that its commanding position would become even greater than the argument from probability would suggest. The rapid

multiplication and spread of good copies would raise to absolutely prohibitive levels the chances against an opportunity for an aberrant text form to gain any kind of widespread acceptance or use.” (Pickering, 109)

- Dr. Pickering applies the laws of mathematical probability to the MSS of the Byzantine majority to explain why the transmission of the text would have been “normal.”
 - “It follows that within a relatively few years after the writing of the N.T. books there came rapidly a “Majority” text whose form was essentially that of the Autographs themselves. This text form would, in the natural course of things, continue to multiply itself and in each succeeding generation of copying would continue to be exhibited in the mass of extant manuscripts. In short, it would have a “normal” transmission. The law of supply and demand operates within the Church, as well as elsewhere. True believers would be far more interested in obtaining copies of the NT writings than people who were not. Opponents of Christianity, who might attempt to confuse the issue by producing altered copies, would have a much smaller “market” for their work.

The use of such designations as “Syrian,” “Antiochian,” and “Byzantine” for the Majority Text reflects its general association with that region. I know of no reason to doubt that the “Byzantine” text is in fact the form of the text that was known and transmitted in the Aegean area from the beginning.” (Pickering, 110)

- In summation, Pickering states the following regarding his argument for “normal” transmission:
 - “In sum, I believe that the evidence clearly favors that interpretation of the history of the text which sees the normal transmission of the text as centered in the Aegean region, the area that was best qualified, from every point of view, to transmit the text from the very first [Recall the four controlling factors from Lesson 83: 1) access to autographs, 2) proficiency in the source language, 3) strength of the church, and 4) attitude toward the text.] The result of that normal transmission is the “Byzantine” text-type. In every age, including the second and third centuries, it has been the traditional text.

So then, I claim that the N.T. text had a normal transmission, namely the fully predictable spread and reproduction of reliable copies of the Autographs from the earliest period down through the history of transmission until the availability of printed texts brought copying by hand to an end.” (Pickering, 110)

- Lest one think that Pickering bases his position solely on mathematical probability, he states the following regarding the providence of God and activity of God the Holy Spirit in transmission in a footnote on page 109 of *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV*:
 - “I have avoided introducing any argument based on the providence of God, up to this point, because not all accept such argumentation and because the superiority of the Byzantine Text can be demonstrated without recourse to it. Thus, I believe the argument from statistical probability given above is valid as it stands. However, while I have not argued on the basis of Providence, I wish the reader to understand that I personally do not think that preservation of the true text was so mechanistic as the discussion above might

suggest. From the evidence previously adduced, it seems clear that a great many variant readings (perhaps most of the malicious ones) that existed in the second century simply have not survived—we have no extant witness of them. We may reasonably conclude that the early Christians were concerned and able watchdogs of the true text. I would like to believe that they were aided and abetted by the Holy Spirit. In that event, the security of the text is considerably greater than that suggested by probability alone, including the proposition that none of the original wording has been lost.” (Pickering, 109)

- For the sake of accuracy, it is imperative to note Pickering’s exact position as it is somewhat different from mine. Dr. Pickering has not fully shaken free from the insistence of *verbatim identity* of wording as his standard for preservation/transmission. Pickering sees the “precise” wording of the originals as having been preserved in a particular strand or branch of the Byzantine Text-type known as Family 35 (F35). In footnotes on pages 110 and 107 Dr. Pickering states the following about F35:
 - “Within the broad Byzantine stream there are dozens of rivulets (recall that Wisse isolated 36 groups, which include 70 subgroups), but the largest and most distinct line of transmission is Family 35, the main stream, and it was specifically this family that God used to **preserve the precise original wording**. For more on this please see Chapter 7.” (Pickering, 110)
 - “Having myself collated at least one book in some 70 MSS belonging to the line of transmission that I call Family 35, I have a perfect copy of at least 22 of the 27 NT books, copies made from the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. For a copy to be perfect in the 14th century, all of its ‘ancestors’ had to be perfect, all the way back to the family archetype. I believe that the archetype of Family 35 is the Autograph, but if not, it must date back to the 3rd century, at least.” (Pickering, 107)
- My question for Pickering at this point is similar to the question we have asked modern textual critics. In the absence of the autographs themselves, how does Pickering know that F35 contains “the precise original wording?” The answer is that he does not and in this way I believe Pickering carries his arguments too far. Simply proving the antiquity and superiority of the Byzantine Text-type when compared to the Alexandrian, which he does a brilliant job of, would have been sufficient. Instead, Pickering carries the argument too far because of his presupposition that preservation/transmission must have occurred with *verbatim identity*.

Abnormal Transmission

- In addition to discussing “normal” transmission at the hands of the faithful, Dr. Pickering also explains how “abnormal” transmission would have occurred at the hands of the unfaithful i.e., the heretical.
 - “Turning now to the abnormal transmission, it no doubt commenced right along with the normal. The apostolical writings themselves contain strong complaints and warning against heretical and malicious activity. As Christianity spread and began to make an impact on the world, not everyone accepted it as “good news.” Opposition of various sorts arose. . . Certain it is that Church Fathers who wrote during the second century

complained bitterly about the deliberate alterations to the Text perpetrated by “heretics.” Large sections of the extant writings of the early Fathers are precisely and exclusively concerned with combating the heretics. It is clear that during the second century, and possibly already in the first [II Cor. 2:17], such persons produced many copies of N.T. writings that incorporated their alterations. . . The result was a welter of variant readings, to confuse the uniformed and mislead the unwary. Such a scenario was totally predictable. If the N.T. is in fact God’s Word then both God and Satan must have a lively interest in its fortunes. To approach the textual criticism of the N.T. without taking due account of that interest is to act irresponsibly.” (Pickering, 110-111)

- I could not agree more with the preceding statement from the pen of Pickering. To ignore the role of the Adversary in the transmission of the New Testament text is not only naive, more importantly, it is unscriptural. Recall from Lessons [54](#) and [78](#) that we studied the simultaneous nature of preservation and corruption or what Pickering calls normal verses abnormal transmission. The scriptures identify a culture of corruption that existed during the 1st century while the New Testament documents were being written that included the following minimum components.
 - Corrupting the word of God (II Cor. 2:17)
 - Forging the word of God (II Thess. 2:2)
 - Handling the word of God deceitfully (II Cor. 4:2)
 - Any means strategy (II Cor. 11:1-4)
- With these points in mind, a Bible believer ought not be surprised to learn that textual critics agree that “most significant variants existed by the end of the second century” i.e., from very early in church history. F.H.A. Scrivener stated the following in *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*:
 - “It is no less true to fact than paradoxical in sound that the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within a hundred years after it was composed.” (Scrivener, 264)
- In an article titled “The Transmission of the New Testament and its Reliability” G.D. Kilpatrick points out that some of our earliest extant papyri exhibit multiple types of textual problems and inconsistencies.
 - “Let us take out two manuscripts of about this date [A.D. 200] which contain part of John, the Chester Beatty Papyrus and the Bodmer Papyrus. They are together extant for about seventy verses. Over these seventy verses they differ some seventy-three times apart from mistakes.

Further in the Bodmer Papyrus the original scribe has frequently corrected what he first wrote. At some places he is correcting his own mistakes but at others he substitutes one form of phrasing for another. At about seventy-five substitutions both alternatives are known for other manuscripts independently. The scribe has in fact replaced one variant reading by another at some seventy places so that we conclude that already in his day there was variance at these points.” (quoted in Pickering, 111)

- In a different essay Kilpatrick argues that the introduction of new variants ceased at around the year 200 AD because they became difficult to pass off as authentic. Kilpatrick tells that this attitude developed because of how 2nd century heretics were handling the text. Using Origen as an illustration, Kilpatrick states the following:
 - “Origen’s treatment of Matthew 19:19 is significant in two other ways. First he was probably the most influential commentator of the Ancient Church and yet his conjecture at this point seems to have influenced only one manuscript of a local version of the New Testament. The Greek tradition is apparently quite unaffected by it. For the third century onward, even an Origen could not effectively alter the text.

This brings us to the second significant point—his date. From the early third century onward the freedom to alter the text which had been obtained earlier can no longer be practiced. Tatian is the last author to make deliberate changes in the text of whom we have explicit information. Between Tatian and Origen Christian opinion has so changed that it is no longer possible to make changes in the text whether they were harmless or not.” (quoted in Pickering, 112)

- The evidenced discussed in this section offers scriptural and historical evidence that aberrant forms of the New Testament text were produced from very early in church history.
 - “Naturally, some of those text forms may have acquired a local and temporary currency, but they could scarcely become more than oddities along the edge of the “majority” river. Recall the possibility of checking against the Autographs must have served to inhibit the spread of such text forms.

For example, Gaius, an orthodox Father who wrote near the end of the second century, named four heretics who not only altered the text but had disciples who multiplied copies of their efforts. Of special interest here is his charge that they could not deny their guilt because they could not produce the originals from which they made their copies. This would be a hollow accusation from Gaius if he could not produce the Originals either. I have already argued that the church in Asia Minor, for instance, did still have the Autographs or exact copies that they themselves had made—thus they knew, absolutely, what the true wording was and could repel aberrant forms with confidence” (Pickering, 112-113)

- Not only did early aberrant forms of the text have the existence of the autographs to contend with but perhaps, more importantly, the swelling stream of copies as exhibited by the Byzantine majority.
 - “Not only would there have been pressure from the Autographs, but also the pressure exerted by the already-established momentum of transmission enjoyed by the majority text form. As already discussed, the statistical probabilities mitigating against any aberrant text forms would be overwhelming. In short, although a bewildering array of variants came into existence, judging from extant witnesses, and they were indeed a perturbing influence in the stream of transmission, they would not succeed in thwarting the progress of the normal transmission.” (Pickering, 113)

Conclusion

- When judged in light of Pickering’s four controlling factors for “normal” transmission, the evidence does **not** point in the direction of Egypt as the propagator of the *pure* form of the New Testament text.
 - “Putting it all together, what are Egypt’s claims upon our confidence? Frankly, it seems to me to be virtually impossible that a faithful, high quality transmission of the New Testament Text could have taken place in Egypt—it simply lacked the necessary qualifications. Besides the proof is in the pudding. Each of the early MSS that is assigned to the Alexandrian text-type is itself a poor copy—demonstrably so. Not only that, they disagree among themselves to an astonishing extent. Not to mention the hundred, perhaps thousands, of times they disagree, as a group, with the rest of the world.” (Kayser & Pickering, 30)
- The transmission of the text was “normal” and it occurred in the majority text of the Aegean rim otherwise known as the Byzantine text-type.
- In the next Lesson we will consider the stream of transmission.

Works Cited

Kayser, Phillip & Wilbur Pickering. *Has God Indeed Said? The Preservation of the Text of the New Testament*. Omaha: NE: Biblical Blueprints, 2009.

Pickering, Wilbur N. *The Identity of the New Testament Text, IV*. Brazil, 2014.

Scrivener, F.H.A. *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1894.