

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Codex Sinaiticus.

THE study of the Greek Text of the New Testament is a branch of Biblical scholarship which has been overshadowed by the more popular enquiry into matters of authorship and date. Fresh interest in the subject has been aroused recently by the purchase of the famous Codex Sinaiticus by the British Museum from Soviet Russia, and now the Trustees of the British Museum have issued a popular descriptive booklet under the title *The Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Alexandrinus* (British Museum, 1s.). The booklet tells the romantic story of the discovery of the manuscript by the German scholar Tischendorf in a monastery on Mount Sinai, where it was very nearly burnt as rubbish. Then a description is given of its nature and contents, followed by discussions of its various correctors and of its probable date. After this, there is a list of some of the more important variant readings in the gospels. A similar description is given of the Codex Alexandrinus, and the whole is greatly assisted by six excellent illustrations. Any student of the New Testament will be enriched by a perusal of this brief booklet, and will wish to keep it by him for future reference.

While an acquaintance with the manuscripts which underlie our New Testament is of interest in itself, it is also of value in a matter which is of concern to the working minister. From time to time he will find in the margin of the Revised Version a note saying, "Many ancient authorities omit this verse," or "Many ancient authorities read . . ." In his Greek Testament these variant readings will be at the foot of the page, and in better editions there will be a string of mystic letters and numbers signifying the particular manuscripts in which they occur. If he is interested he will desire to make an intelligent choice for himself concerning the variant reading which is to be preferred. Canon B. H. Streeter in his book, *The Four Gospels* (pp. 108-148) has lifted the subject out of its technical obscurity by classifying the texts into families, both according to the locality of their origin and their temporal priority. In the early centuries only the leading churches would possess or preserve manuscripts of their own, and smaller neighbouring churches who might wish to have a copy would send a scribe to make his copy from the nearest original. In this way the manuscripts originating in a certain locality would have a family likeness to one another. These "families" are defined as Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, Byzantium, Italy and Gaul, Carthage. Manuscripts are then

divided into primary, secondary, tertiary and supplementary, according to what is supposed to be their distance from the original document. In course of time the Byzantine text became the standard to which others were corrected, but before this took place this text had already absorbed some of the variants of the others. This Byzantine standard became the basis of the "Received Text" used by Erasmus, but as other ancient manuscripts came to light (including the two mentioned in the booklet) a revision of the English translation became necessary, and was completed in 1881. This theory of the grouping of manuscripts according to their locality cannot be followed in all cases without reserve, for there are places in which two texts of the same group are in opposition to one another, but it helps to clarify the task of collation in two ways. In the first place, it makes clear that the true reading is not to be discovered by counting the manuscripts on one side and on the other and following the majority reading, but rather by weighing the texts concerned, giving more value to some than to others, and discovering the family grouping on either side. In the second place, it reveals the fact that certain readings have been influenced by the doctrinal tendencies of the churches concerned, and their value must be estimated accordingly.

When we come to ask what are the causes giving rise to variations, we may divide them roughly into three classes. In the first place, there are the slips which are naturally made by anyone who is set to copy something by hand. Next, there is the tendency to harmonise one gospel reading with that of another gospel. This may be deliberate, or it may be unintentional, but in either case the effect is the same. Lastly, there is the perpetuation of a reading which has a certain theological bias in accordance with the opinions of the scribe who is making the copy or the church for whom it is made.

Of the families mentioned above, it is generally considered that the Alexandrian is the one which is deserving of the most attention. Both of the two manuscripts mentioned in the booklet are members of this family, and both of them are dated in the fourth century. Their importance, therefore, is manifest, as they represent two important branches of one of the main streams of New Testament tradition.

E. H. DANIELL.