THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS WITNESSES BEFORE 200 A.D:
OBSERVATIONS ON $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ (P. OXY. 3523)

by
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$\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ (P. Oxy. 3523) was first published in volume L of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri in 1983. It is a torn scrap with writing on recto and verso containing the Gospel of John 18, 36 - 9, 7. The fragment is housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Its first editor, T. C. Skeat, assigned to it a date of the second century\(^1\). If Skeat’s judgment is correct, $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ is one of our earliest New Testament papyri.

It is surprising that this Papyrus fragment has not received more attention. A second presentation of the text according to Skeat’s editio princeps was presented in New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Volume 7\(^2\). A second edition of the text was published by W. J. Elliott and D. C. Parker in the Papyri volume on John in connection with the International Greek New Testament Project\(^3\). At nineteen places Elliott and Parker parted company with the first edition. Given the fragmentary nature of the text, such differences of editorial judgment are not surprising. Kurt Aland presented the text of $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ in synoptic arrangement with $\mathfrak{p}^{66}$ and $\mathfrak{p}^{52}$, but the text of $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ which he prints « differs at numerous points from the text of P. Oxy. L »\(^4\).

In 1991 Stuart Pickering published a study of several New Testament Papyri, including $\mathfrak{p}^{90}\(^5\). His examination of $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ casts doubt on the dating of the text to the late second century. His judgment rests on the revision of the dating of other papyri, notably the Egerton papyrus and the Oxyrhynchus Genesis, which aided in the original judgment, and the general uncertainty that pertains to dating on the basis of handwriting. But the late second century date was re-affirmed without question by Elliott and Parker. Others have sought to place the date slightly earlier\(^6\). If we assign a date around 180 A. D. to this fragment we will probably not be wide of the mark.

The handwriting of $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ suggests at least some contact with what Zuntz called « Alexandrian philological know-how. » The script is a well-formed, small round capital. There are small serifs or curls at the end of strokes. A diaeresis appears, though not regularly over initial ι and υ. The blank space of about two letters before a change of speaker in line 6 and the projection of letters into the margin suggesting punctuation at the beginning of lines 5, 11, 21 and 24 point to editorial ability. $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ is probably the product of a scriptorium.

With one possible exception (Line 38-9, Jn 19,5, which is our earliest witness to Pilate’s statement « Behold the man »), the variations in $\mathfrak{p}^{90}$ are stylistic in character. The largest number (36 in Skeat’s 1983 collation) involve the deletion or addition of a word or phrase. Word order is next with 16 instances (N.B. this is the most frequent cause of variation in $\mathfrak{p}^{66}$). There are eight

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5 Ibid., p. 11-27.
substitutions of a different phrase. Six variations involve the article and six concern spelling, not counting the repeated Πειλατος. We note also that ανθρωπος in line 39 is not abbreviated in Ἱοντος. We note also that ανθρωπος in line 39 is not abbreviated in Ἱοντος. Gordon Fee has assessed all these types of variation in relation to Ἱοντος in his landmark work on that codex. Fee studied the variations found in Ἱοντος which differed both from that manuscript’s « basic tradition » (Fee’s term for the text of B and allies) and in relation to identifiable features of Johannine style. His conclusion cites Birdsall’s judgment that Ἱοντος is a « very mixed text, » giving « no unsullied ancestor of Vaticanus, but a marred and fallen representative of the original text.» Fee demonstrates that a large part of the secondary readings are « in favor of a smoother, easier text, the kind of corruption that is predominant in the Byzantine MSS of later centuries.»

Looking at Ἱοντος alongside Ἱοντος (with an eye on Ἱοντος where they overlap) we note the following stylistic features:

**Additions and Omissions (36):**

The most frequent type of variation in Ἱοντος is the addition or omission of a word or phrase. Asyndeton is « an important element of Johannine Greek » and Fee noted the tendency of Ἱοντος to eliminate it. So we note especially in relation to Ἱοντος:

- Line 12 (Ἰν 18, 36): Ἱοντος adds οὐν
- Line 24 (Ἰν 19, 1): Ἱοντος appears to include καὶ with ABDsuppl.
- Line 32 (Ἰν 19, 4): Ἱοντος appears to read καὶ εἶξηλθεν, its corrector εξηλθεν οὖν.

If words were added by Ἱοντος to obtain a smoother, easier text, others were removed. In general the assumption was that the better style was the briefer. At five places where Ἱοντος omits a word found in Ἱοντος this concern may be detected:

- Line 2 (Ἰν 18, 36): Ἱοντος omits αὐτον
- Line 19 (Ἰν 18, 39): Ἱοντος omits ινα
- Line 21 (Ἰν 18, 40): Ἱοντος omits λεγοντες
- Line 42 (Ἰν 19, 6): Ἱοντος omits αυτοις with BLW etc.
- Line 42-3 (Ἰν 19, 6): Ἱοντος omits αυτοις.

**Word Order and Transposition:**

Fee noted that transposition of words is the most frequent cause of deviation in Ἱοντος from its « basic tradition » At five places Ἱοντος differs from Ἱοντος. Care must be exercised in assessing changes of this type, since Greek word order is very free. We note the following:

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Line 6 (Jn 18, 37): συ ει. This is the one singular reading of \( \Psi^{90} \) (\( \Psi^{66} \) is defective). The usual Johannine usage is συ ει as against ει συ. Note Pilate’s question at 18, 33: συ ει ο βασιλευς των Ιουδαιων. I suspect that \( \Psi^{90} \) preserves the original reading.

Lines 15-16 (Jn 18, 39): εγω ουδεμιαν ευρισκω εν αυτω αιτιαν. We note that \( \Psi^{90} \) transposes the words in lines 35-36. This is also true for \( \Psi^{66} \). The two papyri agree at 19, 4 in a reading that is likely original. But which is right at 18, 38? There is no easy solution to this mass of variants. It is to be noted, however, that John’s habit is to transpose words when an expression is repeated. An eye should be kept on influence on this text from 19, 4 and the other gospels.

Line 26 (Jn 19, 2): στεφανον εξ ακανθων. NA\(^{27} \) follows \( \Psi^{90} \). \( \Psi^{66} \) inverts the words, probably in the interest of better style.

The Article with Proper Nouns:

\( \Psi^{90} \) also differs with \( \Psi^{66} \) on the matter of the article before proper nouns. Fee’s study shows some tendency of \( \Psi^{66} \), more marked in \( \Psi^{75} \) and B, toward omitting the article. He concludes « This is one of the few points of style where \( \Psi^{66} \) fails to pick up a pattern of secondary readings »\(^{13} \). At two places in the overlapping verses \( \Psi^{90} \) reads the article whereas \( \Psi^{66} \) omits it:

Line 6 (Jn 18, 37): ο Ιησους
Line 12 (Jn 18, 38): ο Πειλατος.

The more classical usage is to omit the article. The Johannine tendency, more common in Hellenistic Greek, is to include it. I suggest that on these occasions, \( \Psi^{90} \) probably reproduces the original; \( \Psi^{66} \) represents a revision.

Different words:

Of the word substitutions two especially should be noted:

Line 24 (Jn 19, 1) The subordinate form of \( \Psi^{90} \) (\( \lambdaαβον...\epsilonμαστιγωσεν \) is coordinate in \( \Psi^{66} \) (\( \epsilonλαβεν...\kappaαι \epsilonμαστιγωσεν \)). Smyth notes that the coordinate is more classical, the subordinate common in the later language\(^{14} \). The change to parataxis may be in the interest of improvement.

Line 38-39 (Jn 19,5): ιδου. ιδε is read by ADsuppl. \( \GammaΔΘ \) f\(^1 \) ω. This would be the only sure instance of ιδου introducing a nominal expression in John. Normally John used ιδε. \( \Psi^{90} \) is probably wrong here\(^{15} \).

By my reckoning, \( \Psi^{90} \) appears to deviate in matters of style from NA\(^{27} \) nine times (aside from spelling), whereas \( \Psi^{66} \) deviates 15 times. Admittedly this is a calculation of two fragmentary and reconstructed manuscripts. Nevertheless, it seems that the scribe of \( \Psi^{90} \), whoever she was, has followed more closely the textual tradition which approximates what we have in UBS\(^4 \) / NA\(^{27} \). Our one remaining page of the text of \( \Psi^{90} \) indicates that she is preserving that tradition in the late second century, by contrast to the stylistic revision evidenced in \( \Psi^{66} \).

\(^{13} \) Ibid., p. 54.


\(^{15} \) G. D. KILPATRICK, op. at., p. 206.
Both seem to be products of the scriptorium, where both accuracy and style would have been matters of concern.

How are we to assess these minor but recurrent stylistic alterations in the earliest New Testament manuscripts available to us? These are not changes in the interest of atticism, such as may be detected elsewhere in the New Testament Manuscript tradition\(^ \text{16} \). They need to be assessed in relation to the range of attitudes toward language in the second century.

In his recent major study, *Hellenism and Empire* (Oxford, 1996) Simon Swain begins with a discussion of the importance of atticism in the era of the second sophistic (second century A.D.)\(^ \text{17} \). All the major writers of the period were concerned to write good Greek, and the ability to write a Greek resembling that of the classical language was a key to power and money. For some this meant a very careful attention to proper rules of vocabulary, grammar and style. Handbooks and lexica were produced in order to aid those wishing to produce the best Greek, and those of Phrynicus and Moeris, and of Pollux (Julius Pollux of Naucratis) and Harpocration have come down to us in various states of preservation. Some writers gave very close attention to atticism. Swain calls Herodes Atticus «the first fully atticising author »\(^ \text{18} \). Aelius Aristides, who flourished in the late second century, was « the model of atticistic style in antiquity »\(^ \text{19} \). We learn of Favorinus who strove above all else « to seem Greek and to be Greek »\(^ \text{20} \), and of Appian, « an atticising author, but a rather unsuccessful one »\(^ \text{21} \). Others criticized and ridiculed the slavish following of attic handbooks and lexica (hyperatticism), Lucian being the best example. His *Lexiphanes* is probably a satirizing of Pollux, the word-collector of the *Onomasticon*. Nevertheless Lucian, too, for all his critique, had a concern to write good Greek\(^ \text{22} \) and « worried about making mistakes in Greek that verges on paranoia »\(^ \text{23} \). Galen, the philosopher and physician to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, stood against the atticizing movement, but, as Swain points out, he wrote a highly educated Greek (non-belletristic, appropriate to the practical nature of his medical writing). But his non-atticizing style « did not keep him from worrying about the matter »\(^ \text{24} \). And Plutarch, for all his differences from the atticists, « shows their tight grip on the Greek elite, and the inability of even a very great individual to resist the purifying call »\(^ \text{25} \). In short, all who wrote and wished to be read in the era had to give special attention to matters of style. Interestingly, Swain mentions Tatian\(^ \text{26} \) but does not take note of his attack of Attic style and diction\(^ \text{27} \) in a manner reminiscent of Lucian or Galen. And there seemed to be no general agreement, either among grammarians or lexicographers or popular writers of essays, satires, speeches or novels, of what was the best Greek. The important thing to note is the concern for style among the educated in the second century.

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\(^ {17} \) S. SWAIN, *Hellenism and Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.

\(^ {18} \) *Ibid.* p. 79-80.


\(^ {20} \) *Ibid.* p. 44.


\(^ {22} \) *Ibid.* p. 311.

\(^ {23} \) *Ibid.* p. 46.

\(^ {24} \) *Ibid.* p. 29.


But how far down on the social and educational scale may we trace this concern in the second century? Here Swain’s comment on the language of the New Testament and the Papyri is instructive:

« A much lower form of Greek can be seen in early Christian texts like the Gospels and the Didache and of course in voluminous numbers of the Papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt. In many of these we are on the borderline between texts that have some claim on education and those that have none » 28.

In his often-cited article regarding G. D. Kilpatrick’s studies on atticism and the text of the New Testament, Carlo M. Martini (now Cardinal Archbishop of Milan) questions whether the occurrence of an atticising form can represent a genuine instance of sensitivity toward such issues of language 29. Concerning the minor official responsible for the notice about the collection of taxes, dated 17 May 136 A.D. (P.S.I. VII, nr. 792), Martini wrote, « This notice is part of a register of a public official (not probably a supporter of the atticistic revival) » 30. But more material has come to light and more studies done which give a better picture of literary abilities of minor officials in Roman Egypt. For example, Naphtali Lewis conducted a study based on papyrological and epigraphic evidence of the non-scholar members of the Alexandrian library in the Roman period 31. The eleven officials studied span the period of the second sophistic, and most are second century. Admittedly, such membership is an honorary award, but indicates the political, social and personal value of literary honors throughout the era. Indeed, further evidence may be added to Lewis’ list. Even minor officials cared about the kind of language in which petitions and official correspondence were couched. And one of the officials on Lewis’ list shows up in the letter about books, P. Oxy. 2192, one of E. G. Turner’s « Scribes and Scholars of Oxyrhynchus » 32. A comprehensive study of style in the documentary papyri would pay dividends to those studying stylistic variations in the text of the New Testament.

The value of such study was brought home to me last year. While I was working in the Papyrus collection at Yale University’s Beineke library, under the guidance of Prof. Ann Ellis Hanson, I made a discovery. My study of P. Yale inv. 277, a fragment of a petition prepared for the conventum of the prefect Ti. Haterius Nepos revealed that it was a copy of an already published petition in the Michigan Papyrus collection. (P. Mich. inv. 6629 = SB 8001). This is a fragment from the extensive archive of Apollonius the Strategos of the Apollonopolite Heptakomias from 113-120 A.D. (Incidentally, he may be of special interest to us in that he suppressed the Jewish revolt in middle Egypt in the second decade of the second century). The Yale fragment appears to be the more finished copy of the Michigan petition, which is the rough draft. 33 Now what is interesting here is that in the two fragments, each with only ten lines, there are two stylistic variations in the sixteen overlapping words. One involves word order. In the other P. Mich. 6629 line 8 reads ηξειν, whereas P.Yale 277, line 3, reads ηκειν. But here we find the atticizing form (the future infinitive) in the less-polished copy! Let me tell you what I think has happened here. Psenanouphis, son of Artepos from Tanuaithis, who petitions the prefect through

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Apollonios the Strategos, has used a scribe with a careful but not literary hand and the best possible usage he could muster. This includes an atticizing form designed to impress the imperial representative and emphasize the importance of the case. But the second scribe (P. Yale 277) tones it down. The sixty-six silver drachmas in dispute is not an insignificant amount. But it does not merit the style of language reserved for the most important occasions.\textsuperscript{34}

The stylistic variations of P. Yale 277 and SB 8001 are akin to what we find in the earliest strata of the New Testament manuscript tradition. However, a study of documentary papyri with extant copies, made possible by Bruce E. Nielson through his recently published and open-ended \textit{Catalog of Duplicate Papyri}\textsuperscript{35} tells another story. My preliminary checking of Nielsen’s initial listing of 337 papyri with extant copies shows that, with few exceptions, the copies are identical. The difference here is probably due to the fact that the copies listed by Nielson are official and for the record (many together and uncut), whereas the Michigan fragment is a first draft, the Yale copy the official petition.

In this connection it is interesting to compare \(\mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{90}\) and \(\mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{52}\). They only have 15 words of overlap, and the intervening matter must be conjectured, but nowhere in the overlap is there a certain variation. \(\mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{66}\), however, offers one and perhaps two variations in the common matter. Perhaps what we are dealing with in the New Testament fragments is a difference between official texts for church use (\(\mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{52}, \mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{90}\)) and unofficial texts, for individual use (\(\mathfrak{P}\textsuperscript{66}\)), in this case from the hand of a scribe sensitive to the issues of style current in the era.

More fragments of the New Testament are appearing from the second century. The recently-published P. Oxy. 4403, 4404 and 4405 offer samples of Matthew’s Gospel from the late second century. The stylistic features of these fragments add to a growing body of evidence for an emerging Christianity in Egypt and beyond, since the papyri, though found in Egypt, may not have originated there.\textsuperscript{36} They may help us to a better understanding of that Christianity which began the century as a Jewish sect that was struggling to survive the devastating revolt of 113-117 A. D., and ended it as a theologically and intellectually confident force in the Alexandrian Catechetical School under the leadership of Pantaenus and Clement.\textsuperscript{37}

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\item \textsuperscript{34} S. SWAIN, op. cit., p. 410.
\item \textsuperscript{37} I am grateful to Rachel Maxson of Yale University for help with this article.
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