# FROM NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS TO A CENTRAL ELECTRONIC DATABASE

*David Trobisch (Bangor)*

*ABSTRACT*

*Scholars and teachers of New Testament text criticism need to access photographs of manuscripts. The article proposes to facilitate communication between scholars and institutions holding manuscripts by establishing a central electronic database, containing pictures of all pages of all New Testament manuscripts, and accessible through the INTERNET.*

## *1. ARTICLE*

The last scholarly edition of the New Testament, which claimed to document the complete manuscript evidence, was Constanin Tischendorf's *Editio Octava Critica Maior,* published in 1869.[1] The apparatus covered one papyrus, 64 majuscules, and a few, mostly undocumented minuscule manuscripts.[2]

Today, we know not of one papyrus but of 115 (P 115= P Oxy 4499), and not 64 majuscules but more than three hundred. Together with the medieval minuscules, the manuscript evidence amounts to more than 5400 witnesses.[3] The vast number of witnesses results in a huge number of

---

1 "Tischendorf offers the evidence known in his time, citing it completely and accurately" (Aland 1989:11).

2 Tischendorf relied heavily on previous printed editions for the selection of minuscule readings. In the third volume Gregory lists and describes 2080 minuscules, he has personally seen about 200 more and estimates the number of extant minuscules exceeding 3000. Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Vol III, pars altera (published 1890) 453, *"Scilicet in hoc catalogo sunt codicum duo milia octingento. Exstant autem plus quam tria milia, ducentos enim alios ipse vidi."*

3 "The total number of manuscripts now stands at 5,487 according to the official registry of manuscripts maintained by Aland in the Institute for New Testament Textual Research" (Aland 1989:74).

variants. A conservative estimate will assume between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand variants in the text of the New Testament.

This enormous number of variants exceeds the technical limits of printed critical editions. If a scholar is interested in viewing a specific passage of the New Testament in a specific manuscript, with few exceptions he or she will have to identify the museum or library that holds the manuscript and either travel there or order photographs. In this respect, very little progress has been made since Tischendorf.

## *2. LIMITED ACCESS TO MANUSCRIPTS*

Every science needs what Germans call *Gegenstand*, an object to be investigated, described, and interpreted. A medical doctor who wants to do research on a human organ will study specimens of this organ. A marine biologist interested in primitive life forms of the deep sea will observe samples of primitive life forms of the deep sea. A New Testament scholar, however, who wants to look at an exemplar of his *Gegenstand*, an actual manuscript, will find it is not easily accessible. To ensure the scientific integrity of the discipline scholars should have access to photographs of the evidence upon which all printed editions of the Greek New Testament are based.

New Testament professors often work as educators for academic institutions. They assist students in forming an opinion on the authority, value, and function of the Christian Bible. This opinion should be true to the evidence, well argued, and meaningful in the students' professional context. I have found that the single most helpful tool to achieve this goal is to have students compare a few lines of a manuscript with a printed edition. Invariably, they will encounter differences in orthography, punctuation, accentuation, word order, and text. I could lecture for hours, explaining that there is no original copy of the New Testament, with little effect. They have to see with their own eyes that the Christian movement has transmitted its sacred writings with a wealth of variants.

The New Revised Standard Version translates Luke 24:51 as "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The editors provide a footnote[c] after this sentence. The footnote reads, "Other ancient authorities lack *and was carried up into heaven*".

A photograph of the particular passage in Codex Sinaiticus would enable the teacher to highlight a number of interesting issues. The professor could introduce the student to one of the oldest copies of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus, explain the history and editorial concept of the most popular edition of the Greek New Testament, the Nestle-Aland edition, talk about an important text-critical guide line, *lectio difficilior*, and interpret the omission as one of the most common transcriptional errors, *homoioarcton*. One glance at the evidence, in this case a page from Codex

Sinaiticus, would allow the student to critically participate in the scholarly discussion of this passage.

It is my contention that without access to the visual information, text-criticism, the most basic of exegetical methods, cannot be taught well.

Those who study fragmentary evidence know that there is no substitute for visual data. The 25th edition of the Nestle text listed 75 papyri in 1975; at the end of the century 115 New Testament papyri were classified by number, almost all of them are fragmentary. This is an increase of 53% over 25 years. Why do we need access to visual data? —Because many of the oldest witnesses have survived as fragments only, and because there is still more to be discovered.

The Nestle-Aland edition collates a selected number of witnesses at a selected number of places. If the editors decided not to document variants for a specific text, there is no way for the users to know whether this text is transmitted without variants or not. For example, the New Revised Standard Version translates Matthew 5:13 as "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" The Greek verb translated as "lost its taste" is μωραίνω, "to lose one's mind", which does not make much sense in the context. No variants are noted. $P^{86}$, a fourth century witness to this passage, however, replaces the verb with μαραίνομαι, "to wither away", which makes perfect sense. This may very well be what the author of the passage had in mind. Because the apparatus of the $NTG^{27}$ does not note variants here, the user of the edition does not learn about the variant in $P^{86}$ and its attestation in later manuscripts.[4]

In order to produce one-volume editions of the New Testament, editors have to choose where they want to note variants and where not. However, scholars writing a commentary or students preparing an exegesis of a short passage may want to check more than the twelve to fifteen manuscript witnesses that are typically collated in the $NTG^{27}$ or they may want to check all the variants of one specific manuscript for the specific passage. A database with visual information on the manuscripts would immediately become a standard resource for exegetes.

Every critical edition is prone to errors. A visual database would help track down errors in printed editions and improve our texts. Ephesians 1:1 is one of the better-known variants in the Letters of Paul. Some of the best manuscripts transmit the text without the address "to the Ephesians" and read τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν (to the saints who are ['in Ephesus' is missing]). $P^{46}$ leaves out one τοις thus producing the grammatically better phrase τοῖς ἁγίοις οὖσιν (to those who are saints). However, singular readings in $P^{46}$ are only trustworthy if they are backed by independent attestation. This

---

[4] Edition of $P^{86}$: Charalambakis 1974. $P^{86}$ is listed as a "consistently cited witness of the first order" for the gospels by the editors of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*[27] (Aland 19##:15*).

is why it was significant that the NTG[25] originally noted "D it Ambst Pel" in support of $P^{46}$'s reading. Closer examination of Codex Claramontanus (D 06), however, shows that this manuscript does not contain the article τοῖς. Despite all their efforts to compare every noted variant with the manuscripts, the editors of the 26th edition did not catch this error, which was carried over from previous printed editions. The mistake was quietly corrected during one of the reprints of the 26th edition. Broader access to photos of manuscripts would result in more discoveries of this kind and help eliminate errors.

Because of the enormous number of documented variants, editors of printed editions have to be selective. Whereas the compact Nestle-Aland edition limits the number of witnesses and the number of variants, *Text und Textwert* (Aland 1991) limits the number of places where variants are collated but not the number of witnesses. The *Editio Critica Maior* (Aland 1997) finally limits the number of witnesses but not the number of variants; this edition attempts to note all variants in all those witnesses, which reflect the text of the first millennium. Nevertheless, ideally scholars should be presented with the complete data. To a Byzantine scholar, for example, the restriction to the first nine hundred years of transmission may limit the usefulness of this edition considerably.

It takes a long time to produce critical editions. The more compact the apparatus, the more explanation and user training are necessary. Furthermore, the limited number of printed copies forces the publisher to ask for a high price. As a consequence, few scholars are able to purchase personal copies and many libraries do not subscribe to all of these editions, and as a result the majority of New Testament scholars does not have easy access to all of the editions mentioned above.

One final reason to make the visual data accessible is to encourage libraries and collections that have not yet done so to make photographs of their holdings. This would prevent originals from being destroyed by deterioration, disasters or accidents.

To my knowledge, no attempt has ever been made to print photographic editions of all Biblical manuscripts. The price would be exorbitant. The INTERNET, however, is a media particularly suited for transmitting visual data worldwide and at low cost.

### *3. A CENTRAL AGENCY*

How should such a project be organized?

One of the key objectives must be to protect the interests of the libraries who own the manuscripts. A basic function of libraries is to make the material they administer accessible to the users they serve. However, libraries have to balance their goal to serve the public against their

responsibility to protect their possessions. Agreements and collaboration with the relevant libraries will decide about success or failure of the project. A first step for an INTERNET based project would be to provide a central pertinent list of curators. Users could log on, pick a manuscript and receive address, phone, fax and email information about who to contact for copyright requests and photographs.

A next step could be to negotiate terms with individual libraries, which would allow a central agency to serve as a clearinghouse. For a recent book, I had to contact three institutions and request photographs and copyright permission for five manuscript pages. It took ten months to produce the required paperwork, make the payments, and receive the five photos. This is a trying process for both the publishing scholar and the libraries that hold the manuscripts. It is easily conceivable that at some point in the future a central agency could serve libraries and users by managing high-resolution scans of New Testament manuscripts and selling copyright permissions through a web site. And if the specific library agrees, low-resolution images could be made available at no cost to the users through the web site as well.

Most libraries with manuscript holdings have a process in place to make photos available on demand. Many are now moving away from paper photographs to electronic formats. A central agency could help curators communicate experiences with scanning technologies and it could serve as a forum for experts. It could host conferences and sponsor publications.

In the past decades paper catalogues have disappeared from most libraries and were replaced by computer terminals. Many libraries have made a transition from printed reference works to database subscriptions. In the United States the subscription to these databases is organized through regional consortia, which are responsible for the negotiations with the data providers (Baker 2000, 46-50). A central agency should try to make use of the same venues that libraries already subscribe to when they access electronic information.

Who should underwrite and organize such a project? It would have to be a respected institution that could be held legally liable by libraries. Academic institutes working within the framework of universities or Bible societies seem natural candidates. The quality of the work could be controlled by academic peers through the traditional venues of conferences and published reviews.

Success or failure of such a project will depend on the ability to communicate with the curators and librarians who administer manuscript collections and on the quality of services provided to the users.[5]

---

[5] The idea to make photos of manuscripts available through the INTERNET is not new. Many promising steps have already been taken. The Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS) is a joint project of Columbia University, Duke University, Princeton University, University of California, Berkeley, University of Michigan, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and Yale University. It gives access to manuscripts by linking cataloguing with images,

*4. SUMMARY*

The 20th century did not produce an edition of the New Testament that documents the known manuscript evidence comprehensively. The main reason lies in the enormous number of manuscripts and the resulting variants, which exceeded the possibilities of the printed media. The particular strength of the INTERNET, however, is to give access to virtually unlimited visual data worldwide, and to do it fast and cheap.

As a scholar I would not have to travel to Heidelberg, Münster, Vienna, Ann Arbor, Washington, or New York as I have had to in the past to check on the particularities of a specific passage in a particular manuscript. I could receive the copyright permission and high-resolution graphic files for my next book directly through the INTERNET and pay with my credit card. And as a teacher I could better train my students.

You will have realized by now that I interpreted the invitation to give the keynote address as a license to dream. In my dreams I see a central, electronic database, containing pictures of all pages of all New Testament manuscripts, easily accessible through the INTERNET by everyone, anytime, and from everywhere.

*ABBREVIATIONS*

Nestle-Aland: Aland (1993)
$NTG^{27}$ = Aland (1993)

*BIBLIOGRAPHY*

Aland, B. & Aland, K. 1989. *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticisms*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill.

Aland, B. & Aland, K. *et alii* 1993. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 27th edition. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

bibliography, text, and secondary literature (http://odyssey.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/APISgrant.html). The Electronic New Testament Manuscripts Project (ENTP) is a concerted effort of volunteers under the leadership of the Australian scholar Tim Finney. It boasts an impressive list of manuscript curators and contact information (http://www.entmp.org/). The most complete collection of links to photographs of Biblical manuscripts on the INTERNET I found at the personal web site of Wiland Willker, a German chemist (http://www1.uni-bremen.de/~wie/bibel.html). A reference work dedicated to the study of manuscripts is Robert Waltz's online companion to the Encyclopedia of New Testament Textual Criticism (http://www.skypoint.com/~waltzmn/). Two good examples of what libraries can do to make their manuscript holdings accessible are the project of Gideon Nisbet to put the Oxyrhynchus Papyri online (http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/POxy/frame1.htm) and Dieter Hagedorn's online documentation of the Greek papyri of the Heidelberg collection (http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~gv0/Papyri/P.Heid._Uebersicht.html).

Aland, B.; Aland, K.; Mink, G. & Wachtel, K. (eds.) 1997. *Novum Testamentum Graecum, Editio Critica Maior, Der Jakobusbrief.* Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

Aland, K.; Mink, G.; Benduhn-Mertz, A. & Bachmann, H. (eds.) 1991. *Text und Textwert der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments: II. Die Paulinischen Briefe.* Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.

Baker, A. 2000. The Impact of Consortia on Database Licensing. *Computers in Libraries* (June 2000), 46-50.

Bilabel, F. (ed.) 1923. *56: Septuagintapapyrus. Veröffentlichungen aus den badischen Papyrus-Sammlungen: Griechische Papyri* (Urkunden, Briefe, Schreibtafeln, Ostraka etc.) mit 2 Tafeln 4, 24-27.

Charalambakis, C.; Hagedorn, D.; Kaimakis, D. & Thüngen, L. 1974. Vier literarische Papyri der Kölner Sammlung. *ZPE* 14, 37-40; table II c.

*The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version* 1990. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Tischendorf, C. (ed.) 1869-94. *Novum Testamentum Graece: Ad antiquissimos testes denuo recensuit, apparatum criticum omni studio perfectum apposuit commentationem isagogicam praetexuit Constantinus Tischendorf.* Editio octava critica maior, 3 vol. Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient.