

HISTORY OF THE FOUR GOSPELS IN GREEK

Condensed from *The Text of the Greek NT* by Aland and Aland, 1988

Introduction

The Gospels were originally written in Greek. Because there are 100s of surviving fragments of copies of the Greek New Testament from many places and traditions and from all centuries, there is abundant material from which to establish the original form of each of the Gospels.

First century

All four Gospels were originally written in koine (common) Greek. They cite the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) from its Greek versions.

Second century

Copies of all four Gospels were carried throughout the empire and beyond as separate literary units.

During the 1st and 2nd centuries in Egypt (all early papyri are from there), four copying traditions appeared, producing periphrastic, free, conservative and strict manuscript recensions.

During the 2nd century, free expansions of the Gospel texts were permitted, for the text had not yet become “canonical” and there was no ecclesiastical control of the text.

In AD 180 at Lyon, Irenaeus wrote of the “tetraeuangelion” (four Gospels). There the canon of gospels was recognized as closed.

Churches used their vernacular languages for worship in the West (Latin), in Syria (Syriac) and in Egypt (Coptic).

In AD 190 at Rome, the Muratorian Canon listed the four Gospels along with other NT books.

Third Century

By AD 200 international Christian correspondence was shifting to Latin. There were still no scriptoria mass-producing copies of biblical manuscripts. “The private copying of texts produced a teeming variety of small textual families ... within larger diocesan groupings.” (55) These “living” texts could be corrected by local standards. Still, though, a strict text was persevered.

By AD 225, churches were more concentrated in the East (Asia Minor, North Africa, and Italy) whence came nearly all theologians and apologists who brought with them their NT texts.

Following the Decius Valerian persecution (250-260) till 303, there were 40 years of peace during which the “koine” (Byzantine) text type appeared in Antioch. An ancestor of the “Western” text (D, 05, called Lucian in 4th century) , which still retained the older text in some passages, appeared in the North Africa or Egypt.

Fourth Century

From 303 there were 10 years of Diocletian persecution, when NT manuscripts were publicly burned, resulting in biblical scarcity. Afterwards, scriptoria were established in Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch and Constantinople, mass-copying both Greek OTs and NTs.

Two major text types prevailed, the Alexandrian (Hesychius or Egyptian) and the Koine (Byzantinian or Lucian) from Caesarea where Constantine turned to supply NTs to the churches at his new capital. There was no distinctively Caesarian or Jerusalem text types.

Fifth Century and later

The Byzantine Empirical text was carried by Antichian students to their sees across the empire, while local recensions continued to be produced.

Conclusion

There remain three text types, Alexandrian, Koine and D. Of these, there are five categories of manuscripts:

- 1) Only Alexandrian strict texts are used to establish the original, both papyri and uncials from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries.
- 2) Texts with some alien influences, like the Byzantine, must be referenced to establish the original.
- 3) Independent texts may be referenced to establish the original, but mostly to establish the history of the text.
- 4) D-type periphrastic texts.
- 5) Byzantine texts. Because these were produced later in large quantities, they are more numerous but are not useful in establishing the original.