

Considerations on the NT Autographa and Early NT

Apographa from Scripture and Patristic Writers

I. Scriptural Presuppositions

Scripture teaches the verbal, plenary preservation of the verbally, plenary inspired autographa (Psalm 12:6-7), the availability of the preserved text to every generation of the people of God (Isaiah 59:21), who, institutionalized in Israel in the Old Testament era and in the church during the age of grace, are responsible for that preservation (Romans 3:2; Matthew 28:18-20).¹ The church of the New Testament (NT) is the autonomous assembly of immersed saints organized to carry out the Lord's work. Her belief and practice would be that of modern Bible-believing and practicing Baptist churches. Such congregations, in accord with Christ's promise (Matthew 16:18), have existed in a continuous succession from the time Christ originated them during His earthly ministry (John 1:35),² during which they have, by God's grace, fulfilled their responsibility to protect and propagate accurate apographs of the *Textus Receptus (TR)*, the modern text-type identical with the originally inspired manuscripts. These Bibliological and ecclesiological axioms, established by God in His Word, constitute the

¹ See *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, ed. Kent Brandenburg (El Sobrante, CA: Pillar and Ground Publishing, 2003) for a book-length justification of these and the other Bibliological postulates referenced in this paragraph.

² For a detailed ecclesiological exposition from a good systematic theology, see *Landmarks of Baptist Doctrine*, vol. 4, Robert J. Sargent, Oak Harbor, WA: Bible Baptist Church Publications, 1990, pgs. 481-596. Biblical ecclesiology has traditionally been denominated *Landmarkism*.

first principles the unbiased³ historian must bring to his evaluation of ecclesiastical and textual-critical history.

II. NT and Patristic Considerations Concerning the Autographs and the *Textus Receptus*

As part of the greatest of commands is to love God with all one's mind (Matthew 22:37), believers should attempt to discover the textual history of the preserved text of Scripture. The dominance and universal acceptance of the *TR* in the church of the Reformation era and subsequent centuries has been documented,⁴ as has its use among the true churches of the Middle Ages⁵ and its towering dominance in the manuscript evidence from that period.⁶ Since God promised to preserve His Word, this Received Text must of necessity have been available in early Christian history as well, as copies of the *TR* autographs, written under inspiration by the authors of the NT books, were

³ An impossible "neutrality" concerning the truths of Scripture that relate to history, ecclesiology, or any other aspect of life, which leads one to pass over God's declarations on these matters in one's evaluation of historical evidences, is not unbiased; it is a wicked refusal to fully submit to the reality of the one true God revealed in the Bible. Atheistic rejection of such historically relevant truths is also utterly unreasonable and biased. True objectivity and unbiased historiography requires that one be in full agreement with the God of truth, who alone created the world, set up its laws, and orders all things that come to pass after the counsel of His own will (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Isaiah 33:6; Ephesians 1:11).

⁴ See "The Canonicity of the Received Bible Established from Reformation and Post-Reformation Baptist Confessions," Thomas Ross, for an example.

⁵ See *Rome and the Bible: Tracing the History of the Roman Catholic Church and its Persecution of the Bible and of Bible Believers*, David Cloud, Oak Harbor, WA: Way of Life Literature, 1997, 2nd ed., pgs. 29-30, *Crowned With Glory and Honor*, Thomas Holland, chapter 3, "Testimony Through Time"; *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*, Benjamin Wilkinson, chapter 2, "The Bible Adopted by Constantine and the Pure Bible of the Waldenses," *Answers to Objections to Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*, Benjamin Wilkinson, chapter 3, "The Itala and the Bible of the Waldenses," Robert L. Webb, *The Waldenses and the Bible*, Carthage, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, n. d. (available at <http://members.aol.com/dwibclc/waldbib.htm>).

⁶ See *Modern Bibles: The Dark Secret*, Jack Moorman, chapter 6, "The Theory Behind the Shorter Bibles," *Forever Settled: A Survey of the Documents and History of the Bible*, Jack Moorman, Chapters 15-17 (both electronically accessed from *The Fundamental Baptist CD-ROM Library*, David Cloud; Way of Life Literature, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061-0368), among many other sources.

circulated. However, the early existence of the *TR* text-type has been questioned by advocates of the modern critical NT text (CT).⁷ The promises of Scripture, which verify its existence, should suffice as proof for believers; however, historical research also evidences its presence in early Greek textual evidence, translational evidence, and patristic citations.⁸ A patristic study of evidences for the longevity of the *autographa*, as well as of early copying practices, is also worthy of examination. The years the original manuscripts were extant reduce the gap between the time of initial inspiration and the era when even the most extreme CT partisans must acknowledge the existence of the Traditional Text. Furthermore, in light of modern neo-evangelical and CT fundamentalist denials of the Biblical imperative of the availability of every Word of Scripture (Matthew 4:4),⁹ the longer the autographs existed, the longer the period that all who believe in inerrancy, regardless of their belief in or opposition to the doctrine of preservation, must acknowledge the continued existence and availability of every word of the NT. For at least as long as the originals were extant, one could examine them and be absolutely certain of every word of his Greek Bible. The possibility of such a comparison would also inhibit the ability of textual aberrations, both unintentional and intentional, to affect the nature of the general stream of manuscript (MSS) evidence. A

⁷ E. g., “All the external evidence suggests that there is no proof that the Byzantine text was in existence in the first three centuries.” (Daniel Wallace, “The Majority Text and the Original Text: Are They Identical?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 148:590 (Apr 91) p. 166). Interestingly, footnote #46 of his own article states that patristic quotations supported the Byzantine Text against the Alexandrian in earlier writers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, Methodius, etc; his qualifications, “external” evidence, “suggests,” no “proof,” are also of note. Wilbur Pickering demonstrates that the Majority Text dominated supposed alternative text types centuries earlier and necessarily existed in the second century (*Identity of the New Testament Text*, chapter 6; electronically accessed).

⁸ *Forever Settled*, Moorman, pgs. 65-128.

⁹ “Scripture does not state how God has preserved the text” (Wallace, “The Majority Text and the Original Text,” pg. 156).

patristic analysis on these issue, with a preliminary consideration of the NT background, is consequently in order.

III. New Testament Witness to the Transmission of the Autographa

In accord with Christ's prayer (John 17:8), the saints and the churches immediately received the books of the New Testament as they were given by inspiration. The seven churches recognized the Revelation of John as Scripture immediately upon receipt of the book (Revelation 1:11), the Thessalonians immediately received the Word of God, for they were believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13), and, led by the Spirit, churches in general received the scripture, which they knew was being penned in their day (Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 14:37; Ephesians 3:4-5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:12, 25; 2 Peter 3:2; Luke 1:3) as the ascended Christ gave it (John 16:13). When Paul wrote 1 Timothy in the early 60s, he recognized Luke's gospel, which had been composed only a few years earlier, as "scripture" equal in authority to the books of Moses (1 Timothy 5:18; Luke 10:7; Deuteronomy 25:4). Paul's declaration concerning the inspiration of "all Scripture" in 2 Timothy 3:16 consequently refers to both the Old Testament (OT) canon and the NT, which, by the time of the inspiration of 2 Timothy, God had, other than the Johannine writings, almost entirely revealed to man. Peter (2 Peter 3:2) refers to the OT books (v. 2a) and the NT books (v. 2b), and calls the collection of "all epistles" by the apostle Paul¹⁰ scripture, equal to "the other scriptures," (2 Peter 3:15-16), the OT

¹⁰ Lewis Foster ("The Earliest Collection of Paul's Epistles," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 10:1 (Winter 1967) p. 44-54) argues very plausibly that Luke first collected Paul's epistles into a canonical whole. He also mentions that "in antiquity to retain copies of letters dispatched to far places was customary. Because of the uncertainty of the postal system and because of the desirability to

(1 Peter 2:6); all of this OT and NT scripture is affirmed to be as sure as the audible voice of God speaking from heaven (2 Peter 1:16-21).¹¹ John closes the NT canon with the solemn warning of Revelation 22:18-19 (cf. Proverbs 30:5-6), evidencing his recognition, one with which his audience would have concurred, of the inspiration of his work (cf. John 21:24) and the completion of the New Testament. The saints recognized the NT as an inspired treasure immediately upon its composition.¹²

The assembly of the NT into a cohesive unit also began very early;¹³ as 2 Peter 3:15-16 indicates, the process was far advanced before Peter's death c. A. D. 68, and so even before the revelation of the final NT books. The NT writings were copied and distributed from church to church (Revelation 1:3). Paul wrote Galatians to "the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:2), which would involve the copying of his epistle. Colossians 4:16 provides a striking example of this practice. Paul commanded that his newly inspired epistle to the church at Colossae be read in that church (v. 16a),¹⁴ then

have a dependable record of what was originally written in case question should later be raised about the correspondence—both of these reasons fully justified the common practice of making copies of correspondence." (Foster, "Earliest Collection," pg. 50). Since the church at Philippi sought to collect the epistles of Ignatius during Polycarp's lifetime (pg. 280, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1. Loeb Classical Library ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), certainly churches were collecting the inspired corpus as well.

¹¹ Consider further that the epistle Paul wrote to the audience of 2 Peter (which was the same as the audience of 1 Peter, 2 Peter 3:1), the Jewish diaspora (1 Peter 1:1), must be the epistle to the Hebrews, since no other Pauline letter is addressed to them. Paul is therefore the author of Hebrews, and this epistle was recognized, along with the other 13 in his corpus, as canonical immediately.

¹² Wilbur Pickering, in his *Identity of the New Testament Text*, chapter 5 (electronically accessed), has a good discussion of early recognition of the inspiration and canonicity of the NT in his section, "Were the N. T. Writings Recognized?"

¹³ Physical evidence for such early compilation exists. The "identification of papyrus fragment 5 from Qumran cave 7 with Mark 6:52-53 . . . [makes] the probability that 7Q4 is to be identified with 1 Tim. 3:16, 4:1,3 and 7Q8 with James 1:23-24 . . . very strong. . . . That someone should have such a collection of New Testament writings at such an early date may suggest their early recognition as Scripture and even imply an early notion of a New Testament canon" (Appendix B, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, Pickering). A theologically liberal critique of the identification of these papyri with the NT is found in "That's no Gospel, It's Enoch! Identification of Dead Sea Scrolls Challenged," Peter W. Flint (*Bible Review*, Peter W. Flint, April 2003, pgs. 37ff.).

¹⁴ This public reading of the epistles placed them on an equal level to the Old Testament, which was also read in the assemblies of the saints (Deuteronomy 31:11; Acts 13:15; 1 Timothy 4:13). Furthermore,

copied and read in the church of the Laodiceans (v. 16b). At the same time, the Colossian congregation was to “read the epistle from Laodicea” (v. 16c). That church, which had not received an inspired autograph,¹⁵ had copied another assembly’s canonical epistle, which was being read in their church; the Colossians were to take this epistle, copy it, and read it in their own assembly. At least three generations of transmission are documented here: the original church which received the inspired letter, the copy made for the Laodiceans, and the copy of that copy now brought to the Colossian church; if the Laodiceans had not transcribed their epistle directly from an autograph, even further epistolary generations are required. Furthermore, the apostolic precept for such multiplication of canonical copies of epistles in Colossians 4:16 would certainly have spurred other assemblies to follow a similar practice—nor did Paul begin to encourage such copying only upon penning Colossians 4:16 (note 1 Thessalonians 5:27—not that church alone, but “all the holy brethren,” are to get this epistle; cf. John’s blessing on those who read and hear his book, Revelation 1:3, which required the distribution and multiplication of copies); he would have already exhorted the churches to such an end. 1 Timothy 6:3 indicates the early circulation of the gospel records—canonical and authoritative (cf. 5:18) “words of our Lord Jesus Christ,” were available, and opposition

we must conclude that individual believers were not satisfied with public reading of the Scriptures in the weekly assembly, but aspired to own their own personal copies, that, as the noble Bereans, they might all search the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11).

¹⁵ It has been supposed by some, based on the subscription to 1 Timothy, “the first to Timothy was written from Laodicea, which is the chiefest city of Phrygia Pacatiana,” that this epistle from Laodicea was 1 Timothy. While, if this is the case, two generations, instead of three or more, are specified in Colossians 4:16, it would still demonstrate the proliferation of NT copies—and would show that an inspired epistle specifically directed to the man Timothy was immediately received by God’s people as something with universal and binding validity.

A pseudepigraphical “epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans” is extant, but it is universally recognized as a forgery. The text is reproduced in the introduction to Colossians in *Notes on the New Testament* by Albert Barnes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998 (reprint of 1884-5 ed.)).

to them brought one under church discipline (6:5).¹⁶ Paul's "yet not I, but the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:10) suggests that both the apostle and the Corinthians had at least one gospel in their possession. When churches exchanged members, traveling evangelists passed through, Paul or others visited assemblies on missionary journeys, and on vast numbers of other occasions, the distribution of NT Scripture would certainly have been in progress. Even apart from the exhortation of Colossians 4:16, the church's recognition of the new inestimable treasure given her from God by inspiration, and its vast importance in the Christian life (cf. Romans 10:17; Matthew 4:4) would of itself have been a powerful motivation to multiply apographs.

Great care was taken to preserve the inspired documents, as the church recognized her role as the guardian of Divine truth (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 3:15; 4:6; 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14; 2:2). Accuracy in copying was considered extremely important (Revelation 22:18-19). As a result, accurate replicas of the inspired documents were distributed as rapidly as Christianity itself.¹⁷ New Testament evidence buttresses the

¹⁶ The CT attacks church discipline by removing "from such withdraw thyself," ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων, from 1 Timothy 6:5.

¹⁷ An interesting archeological confirmation of this rapid spread is the Rylands Fragment of John P52, which is dated to the first third of the second century. The existence of a codex of John in an obscure Egyptian village c. A. D. 125 illustrates the speed with which the NT books were distributed. (see *JETS*, 10:1 (Winter 1967), pg. 42). "Pantaenus [went] to convert the Hindoos, and, whatever his success or failure there, he brought back reports that Christians were there before him, the offspring of St. Bartholomew's preaching; and, in proof thereof, he brought with him a copy of St. Matthew's Gospel in the Hebrew tongue, which became one of the treasures of the church on the Nile" (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Elucidations II: "Pantaenus and his school," AN:II:12480). This testifies to the presence of Scripture in India in the first century through the witness of the apostle Bartholomew (Matthew 10:3). Further information about the collection of the NT canon is found in "Factors Promoting the Formation of the New Testament Canon," Wilber T. Dayton, and "The Canon of the Gospels," Merrill C. Tenney, *JETS* 10:1 (Winter 1967) pgs. 28-35, 36-44 respectively. All citations of Ante-Nicene patristic writings, unless otherwise specified, come from *Church Fathers—The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (AN), ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, American reprint of the Edinburgh ed.; electronic text from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org>), as hypertexted, corrected, and prepared by Oak Tree Software, Inc. for *Accordance Bible Software* (<http://www.accordancebible.com>), version 1.1. Citations of Nicene or Post-Nicene writers come from either *Church Fathers—The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, First Series* (NPN-1) or *Church Fathers—The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (NPN-2), ed. Philip Schaff, T & T Edinburgh. These texts have also been accessed electronically from an *Accordance* software

believer's confidence in God's promises to preserve the *autographa* for all generations; the widespread distribution of accurate apographs of the recognized, canonical NT books validates the promised impossibility of their successful universal corruption.

IV. General Considerations Concerning Patristic Testimony

Patristic testimony, although it has limitations, provides contemporary information about early Christian history, and consequently has definite value in the study of events of its era. A Christian writer who lived not long after the composition of the gospels would be more likely to advance correct theories about their origin than would, say, a German rationalistic critic writing eighteen hundred years *ex post facto*. Nevertheless, patristic compositions are manifestly inferior to the NT in matters of history. First, they are uninspired. Second, unlike Scripture, God has not promised to preserve them, so textual questions can arise which make their current texts uncertain. Third, assuming a lack of Catholic or other heretical interpolation in our current texts, many patristic writers held to dangerous doctrinal errors, which tended to increase in number as their distance from the first century increased; baptismal regeneration appears very early, and idolatry, hierarchicalism, the real presence, and other Popish errors quickly followed. Believers who opposed the Babylonian apostasy were labeled heretics, and their writings were destroyed. Many extant ante-Nicene writers, and certainly those

module based on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library text (also version 1.1). Citations will state the module (AN/NPN-1/NPN-2), the chapter division, and the paragraph # from Accordance for that module. In the passage above concerning Pantaenus, AN:II:12480 means the Ante-Nicene *Accordance* module, chapter 2 in the "Elucidations" section connected with Clement's *Stromata*, paragraph #12480 in the Ante-Nicene module. In footnote #18, AN:XXXVI:20373 means the Ante-Nicene *Accordance* module is cited, chapter 36 in *The Prescription Against Heretics*, paragraph #20373 in the Ante-Nicene module.

after the Constantinian revolution, must not be considered members of true churches of Christ, nor among the number who have received the NT gospel of justification by faith alone. Despite these drawbacks, valuable historical testimony, including textual-critical material, may be gleaned from their compositions.

V. Patristic testimony to the continued existence of the *autographa*

Tertullian, in his *The Prescription Against Heretics*, states:

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, (in which) you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; (and there too) you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of apostles themselves). How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! Where Peter endures a passion like his Lord's! Where Paul wins his crown in a death like John's where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile! See what she has learned, what taught, what fellowship has had with even (our) churches in Africa! One Lord God does she acknowledge, the Creator of the universe, and Christ Jesus (born) of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God the Creator; and the Resurrection of the flesh; the law and the prophets she unites in one volume with the writings of evangelists and apostles, from which she drinks in her faith.¹⁸

The *Prescription* was written c. A. D. 200.¹⁹ Schaff indicates that the phrase “authentic writings” here (Latin, *authenticae*), “may refer to the *autographs* or the Greek *originals*,” or at the very least to “full unmutated copies as opposed to the garbled ones of the

¹⁸ AN:XXXVI:20373.

¹⁹ Pg. 941, “Tertullianus,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. Henry Wace & William C. Piercy, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 (reprint of *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*, pub. John Murray, London, 1911).

heretics.”²⁰ There is no definite reason why the phrase would not refer to the autographs themselves; this would suit Tertullian’s argument, that “the Christian Scriptures . . . are a deposit, committed to and carefully kept by the church,”²¹ which the heretics have perverted, better than the alternative sense. What would better prove heretical corruption of Scripture than a reference to the still extant autographs themselves?²² However, the second sense would still support a long period of accurate transmission, for “full unmutated copies” requires an absence of corruption. Tertullian continues, “What of our own have we introduced, that we should have to take it away again, or else add to it, or alter it, in order to restore to its natural soundness anything which is contrary to it, and contained in the Scriptures? What we are ourselves, that also the Scriptures are (and have been) from the beginning.”²³ His argument assumes the orthodox, unlike their heretical opponents, possess uncorrupted Scripture. Tertullian affirms that the autographs, or at least copies a very small number of generations from them, were still preserved in the churches that had received them at the beginning of the third century.

Furthermore, Tertullian, in book four of his *Five Books Against Marcion*, while arguing against Marcionite alteration of Scripture, declares:

On the whole, then, if that is evidently more true which is earlier, if that is earlier which is from the very beginning, if that is from the beginning which has the apostles for its authors, then it will certainly be quite as evident, that that comes down from the apostles, which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches

²⁰ Footnotes cite by module number, footnote number, and paragraph number. The patristic work will also be cited if it is not clear. This note is AN:383:20808, that is, the Ante-Nicene module, footnote #383 (to Tertullian’s *Prescription Against Heretics*), paragraph #20808 in the module.

²¹ AN:XXXVII:20374. This is the title to the section of Tertullian’s work, and it accurately details his point, although these are not his *ipsissima verba*.

²² Many other patristic writers likewise affirmed that heretics deliberately corrupted Scripture; for example, “The Arians are repeatedly charged by St. Ambrose with falsifying and manipulating Scripture for their own ends . . . the same charge is a common one against all heretical bodies in early days” (*Prolegomena to St. Ambrose: “On the Doctrine of St. Ambrose,”* NPN-2:IV:58093). Many of the CT’s corruptions are deliberate alterations of the *TR* originated by Arians and others to support their heresies.

²³ AN:XXXVIII:20377.

of the apostles. Let us see what milk the Corinthians drank from Paul; to what rule of faith the Galatians were brought for correction; what the Philipians, the Thessalonians, the Ephesians read by it; what utterance also the Romans give, so very near (to the apostles), to whom Peter and Paul conjointly bequeathed the gospel even sealed with their own blood. We have also St. John's foster churches.²⁴

Context points to the conclusion that the "sacred deposit" kept in the "churches of the apostles" would include the autographical MSS, the uncorrupted foundation of apostolic doctrine and the counterpoint to the corruptions of Marcion and his disciples. He likewise affirms that the "the (Gospels) of the apostles have come down to us in their integrity . . . [and] Luke's Gospel [which was doctored by Marcion] also has come down to us in like integrity until the sacrilegious treatment of Marcion."²⁵ In his *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian speaks of the "Christian Scriptures . . . [as] my property. I have long possessed it; I possessed it before you [heretics of his day]. I hold sure title-deeds from the original owners themselves, to whom the estate belonged. I am the heir of the apostles. Just as they carefully prepared their will and testament, and committed it to a trust, and adjured (the trustees to be faithful to their charge), even so do I hold it."²⁶ He considered the Scriptures he used "sure title-deeds from the original owners," which were "carefully prepared" and passed down uncorrupted from the apostolic churches to the African churches where he ministered. Tertullian, in these texts, appears to affirm that the originals were still extant in the apostolic churches in his day, while faithful copies made from them were widely circulated.

²⁴ AN:V:22264.

²⁵ AN:V:22264.

²⁶ AN:XXXVII:20375

Irenaeus, who probably wrote his *Against Heresies* between A. D. 180-185,²⁷ while discussing the reading “666” concerning the mark of the beast and the presence of a variant reading of “616,”²⁸ stated:

1. Such, then, being the state of the case, and this number being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony [to it]; while reason also leads us to conclude that the number of the name of the beast, [if reckoned] according to the Greek mode of calculation by the [value of] the letters contained in it, will amount to six hundred and sixty and six; that is, the number of tens shall be equal to that of the hundreds, and the number of hundreds equal to that of the units (for that number which [expresses] the digit six being adhered to throughout, indicates the recapitulations of that apostasy, taken in its full extent, which occurred at the beginning, during the intermediate periods, and which shall take place at the end), — I do not know how it is that some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number in the name, deducting the amount of fifty from it, so that instead of six decads they will have it that there is but one. [I am inclined to think that this occurred through the fault of the copyists, as is wont to happen, since numbers also are expressed by letters; so that the Greek letter which expresses the number sixty was easily expanded into the letter Iota of the Greeks.]²⁹ Others then received this reading without examination; some in their simplicity, and upon their own responsibility, making use of this number expressing one decad; while some, in their inexperience, have ventured to seek out a name which should contain the erroneous and spurious number. Now, as

²⁷ “Irenaeus,” pg. 520-521, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*.

²⁸ “666” is certainly the correct reading, as even CT advocates aver; it is “strongly supported by P⁴⁷ ⲛ A P 046 051 all extant minuscules it^{gig} vg syr^{ph, h} cop^{sa, bo} arm al” (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Bruce M. Metzger (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 1994; 2nd ed.), note on Revelation 13:18). Nevertheless, the *Revised Standard Version* notes on Revelation 13:18 that “other ancient authorities read *six hundred and sixteen*,” while the *New Revised Standard Version*, *New Living Translation*, *English Standard Version*, and *New American Standard Version*, among others, reference this undoubted corruption as well. The Antichrist will doubtless appreciate these modern Bible versions for confusing the issue of the number of his name.

²⁹ This bracketed sentence is followed by footnote #258 in AN, which reads, “That is, Ξ into EI, according to Harvey, who considers the whole of this clause as an evident interpolation. It does not occur in the Greek here preserved by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.*, 5:8).” While it is true that this sentence is not in the section quoted by Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History* 5:8 he quotes Irenaeus as follows: “Now since this is the number in all the good and ancient copies, and since those who have seen John face to face testify, and reason teaches us that the number of the name of the beast appears according to the numeration of the Greeks by the letters in it . . .” And going on later he says concerning the same point, “We therefore will not take the risk of making any positive statement concerning the name of the Antichrist [and he continues the quote]” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake). Eusebius leaves out much more than this one clause—he skips from the first part of book 5 chapter XXX:1 to near the end of XXX:3 (AN:XXX:7331-7333), with the evident intention of not quoting the entire passage. That a particular clause within the section skipped does not occur, because the entire section is missing, is a weak argument for an interpolation.

regards those who have done this in simplicity, and without evil intent, we are at liberty to assume that pardon will be granted them by God. But as for those who, for the sake of vainglory, lay it down for certain that names containing the spurious number are to be accepted, and affirm that this name, hit upon by themselves, is that of him who is to come; such persons shall not come forth without loss, because they have led into error both themselves and those who confided in them. Now, in the first place, it is loss to wander from the truth, and to imagine that as being the case which is not; then again, as there shall be no light punishment [inflicted] upon him who either adds or subtracts anything from the Scripture, under that such a person must necessarily fall. Moreover, another danger, by no means trifling, shall overtake those who falsely presume that they know the name of Antichrist. For if these men assume one [number], when this [Antichrist] shall come having another, they will be easily led away by him, as supposing him not to be the expected one, who must be guarded against.

2. These men, therefore, ought to learn [what really is the state of the case], and go back to the true number of the name, that they be not reckoned among false prophets. But, knowing the sure number declared by Scripture, that is, six hundred sixty and six, let them await[.]³⁰

A footnote in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* text to the “in all the most approved and ancient copies” clause in this quotation reads, “εν πασι τοις σπουδαιοις και αρχαιοις αντιγραφοις. This passage is interesting, as showing how very soon the autographs of the New Testament must have perished, and various readings crept into the mss. of the canonical books.”³¹ Does this clause indicate indeed that the autographs were already gone? A number of factors suggest otherwise. First, the conclusion is entirely an argument from silence. That the *autographa* are not specifically mentioned does not necessitate their nonexistence. Second, Irenaeus wonders that anyone receives the corrupt reading 616—after all, the correct number is in “all the most approved and ancient copies.” As the autograph of the Revelation, by definition, was only in one place, but a great number of copies had been made from it (a definite implication from Irenaeus’ declaration, and one in favor of a correct textual transmission), his statement apparently relates to the ease of access to one of these “approved” and “ancient” copies, which

³⁰ AN:XXX:7331-2.

³¹ Footnote #252, AN:Footnotes:7610.

would have corrected misunderstanding concerning the apocalyptic number for those who were proclaiming 616. An indirect indication of the loss of the less easily accessible original was not in view. Third, what surely made these copies “approved” was the certainty of their identity with the autograph, which would certainly have been much easier to establish if it was still extant, rather than lost. The word ἀντιγραφός was used for a “certified copy of an official document”³²; these copies could have been made directly from the original penned by John the apostle, or at least had a verifiable and short genealogy to the autograph. It is noteworthy that “all” of these approved copies, not “most” or “almost all,” read 666; this also suggests their common recent derivation from the original. Fourth, Irenaeus had absolute certainty concerning the correct text; 666 was “the true number . . . the sure number,” and partisans for the alternative were worthy of “no light punishment” who will “necessarily fall” as “false prophets” for adding or taking away from Scripture (Revelation 22:18-19). Even those who unknowingly advocate the wrong number require “pardon.”³³ His certainty concerning the correct text is consistent with yet extant autographs. Fifth, “those men who saw John face to face” were still a controlling factor limiting textual alteration; they apparently were able to verify the correct text and were interested in doing so. Irenaeus’ statement concerning the existence and distribution of authoritative “approved and ancient copies,” which he knew with certainty reflected the Johannine autograph, does not demonstrate the early loss of the

³² ἀντιγραφεία/ος, *Greek-English Lexicon*, H. G. Liddell & R. Scott, (9th ed. w/rev. supplement. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996). The word is also used in a more general sense. Among the apostolic “fathers,” the word appears in MPoly 22:2; 23:5; Pap 29:1. (cited from the *Accordance* module *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999); Module version 1.1.) Note also 1 Esdr 2:19; 6:7; 8:8; Esth 13:1; 3:14; 4:8; 16:1, 19; 8:13; 1 Mac 8:22; 11:31, 37; 12:5, 7, 19, 23; 14:20, 23, 27, 49; 15:24; and Bar 6:0 in the LXX. The word does not appear in the NT.

³³ If Irenaeus were alive today, would he not consider the textual controversy a separating issue?

original and the rapidity of universal textual deterioration—it rather testifies to the opposite.

Caius, who apparently flourished in Rome at the beginning of the third century,³⁴ in a work against the heresy of Artemon, stated:

The sacred Scriptures [the followers of Artemon] have boldly falsified, and the canons of the ancient faith they have rejected, and Christ they have ignored, not inquiring what the sacred Scriptures say, but laboriously seeking to discover what form of syllogism might be contrived to establish their impiety. And should any one lay before them a word of divine Scripture, they examine whether it will make a connected or disjointed form of syllogism; and leaving the Holy Scriptures of God, they study geometry, as men who are of the earth, and speak of the earth, and are ignorant of Him who cometh from above. Euclid, indeed, is laboriously measured by some of them. And Aristotle and Theophrastus are admired; and Galen, forsooth, is perhaps even worshipped by some of them. But as to those men who abuse the arts of the unbelievers to establish their own heretical doctrine, and by the craft of the impious adulterate the simple faith of the divine Scriptures, what need is there to say that these are not near the faith? For this reason is it they have boldly laid their hands upon the divine Scriptures, alleging that they have corrected them. And that I do not state this against them falsely, any one who pleases may ascertain. For if any one should choose to collect and compare all their copies together, he would find many discrepancies among them. The copies of Asclepiades, at any rate, will be found at variance with those of Theodotus. And many such copies are to be had, because their disciples were very zealous in inserting the corrections, as they call them, i.e., the corruptions made by each of them. And again, the copies of Hermophilus do not agree with these; and as for those of Apollonius, they are not consistent even with themselves. For one may compare those which were formerly prepared by them with those which have been afterwards corrupted with a special object, and many discrepancies will be found. And as to the great audacity implied in this offence, it is not likely that even they themselves can be ignorant of that. For either they do not believe that the divine Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Spirit, and are thus infidels; or they think themselves wiser than the Holy Spirit, and what are they then but demoniacs? Nor can they deny that the crime is theirs, when the copies have been written with their own hand; nor did they receive such copies of the Scriptures from those by whom they were first instructed in the faith, and they cannot produce copies from which these were transcribed. And some of them did not even think it worthwhile to corrupt them; but simply denying the law and the prophets for the sake of their lawless and impious doctrine . . . they sunk down to the lowest abyss of perdition.³⁵

³⁴ “Caius,” pg. 141-2, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*.

³⁵ The work is now lost; fragments have been preserved in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* 5:28. The text that follows comes from *Fragments of Caius: Against the Heresy of Artemon*, AN:III:48591.

Caius assails his opponents for their corruption of Scripture, evidencing that such alteration of the words “dictated by the Holy Spirit” was considered a damnable crime. One of the ways he proves that his opponents, rather than his own party, were the corruptors of the text, is his statement that the heretics were not able to indicate the source of their own copies.³⁶ The allegation that the Artimonians “cannot produce copies from which [their own] were transcribed” would be empty if the orthodox were not themselves able to demonstrate that their copies matched the autographs. This suggests that the originals were still extant in Caius’ day.

An explicit reference to the continued existence of an autograph is found in fragments from the writings of Peter, bishop of Alexandria from A. D. 300-311:³⁷

But after His public ministry He did not eat of the lamb, but Himself suffered as the true Lamb in the Paschal feast, as John, the divine and evangelist, teaches us in the Gospel written by him, where he thus speaks: “Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment-hall, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the passover.” And after a few things more. “When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment-seat, in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the third hour,” as the correct books render it, and the copy itself that was written by the hand of the evangelist, which, by the divine grace, has been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful.³⁸

Another slightly different version of this fragment from Peter renders the section particularly of note as:

³⁶ Requiring others to provide the sources of their copies was a test of accuracy employed by others as well. For example, Jerome, while arguing with Rufinus over falsifications in the latter’s translation of Origen’s Περὶ Ἀρχῶν, stated, “At all events, to cut short a long discussion, I can point out whence I received the Περὶ Ἀρχῶν, namely, from those who copied it from your manuscript. We want in like manner to know whence your copy of it came; for if you are unable to name any one else as the source from which it was derived, you will yourself be convicted of falsifying it” (*Jerome’s Apology for Himself Against the Books of Rufinus*, book 2, NPN-2:23:20687).

³⁷ Pg. 831-2, “Petrus I,” *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*.

³⁸ AN:V:I:52950.

Now it was the preparation, about the third hour, as the accurate books have it, and the autograph copy itself of the Evangelist John, which up to this day has by divine grace been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful.³⁹

Peter testifies that the original MSS of the gospel of John, the “copy itself that was written by the hand of the evangelist,” was still extant and available in the church at Ephesus to “the faithful,” and was used for textual-critical purposes, such as the “third” hour variant here referenced.

Peter’s reference to the “third” hour is a problem, since ἕκτῃ, not τρίτῃ, is undoubtedly the correct reading. “Sixth” is not only the reading of the preserved *Textus Receptus*, but of the Nestle-Aland text as well; textual critics of all persuasions affirm the evidence for this reading is overwhelming.⁴⁰ Several solutions are possible. First, Peter could simply be wrong about the reading of the autograph at Ephesus. This, however, would undermine his credibility concerning the continued presence of the original. Second, a copy with the incorrect reading replaced the genuine autograph at Ephesus, and Peter accepted the substitute copy as the autograph. This would change the patristic testimony in this passage from an affirmation of textual stability and continuity to one that suggested widespread textual corruption. Third, the patristic fragment itself could contain the error—perhaps the bishop of Alexandria originally wrote *six*, and the reading *three* is a product of an erroneous scribal transcription. The practice of substituting the similar Greek numeral letters *gamma* and *episemon* for the words *three* and *six*, and the

³⁹ AN:V:II:52951.

⁴⁰ “The manuscript evidence is overwhelmingly in support of ἕκτῃ (P⁶⁶ Ⲑ* B E H I K M S U W Y Γ Θ Λ Π f¹ f¹³ all minuscules [except four, with one with τρίτῃ in the margin] Old Latin vg syr^{p, h, pal} cop^{sa, bo} arm eth geo pers al),” *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., Metzger, Note on John 19:14. Note also the commentaries of Alford, Barnes, Clark, Gill, Henry, and Robertson on John 19:14 and Mark 15:25. The CT does alter the TR ὥρα δὲ ὥσεί ἕκτῃ to ὥρα ἦν ὥς ἕκτῃ, but neither text inserts τρίτῃ.

consequent ease of a copyist mistake,⁴¹ is used to explain the interchange of the numbers in NT MSS—why could not such a substitution have occurred in the very poorly attested fragments of Peter of Alexandria? Peter’s actual work is not extant—its modern reproduction depends upon quotations in later writings.⁴² The reading *three* in the current text of Peter could easily be corrupt; a copyist could have substituted it in for an original numeral letter *six* accidentally, or, perhaps influenced by Mark 15:25 or NT MSS that read *three* in John 19:14, deliberately altered his copy of the text of the Alexandrian bishop. If such a numerical substitution in the patristic text took place, its testimony to the longevity of the autograph at Ephesus is essentially undiminished. The witness of Peter of Alexandria to a still extant autograph in the early fourth century, although vitiated by the uncertain origin and significance of the reading *three*, is still remarkable.

Augustine of Hippo, in his *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, c. A. D. 400,⁴³ seems to indicate the continued existence of the NT *autographa* even in his day:

Augustin replied: As I said a little ago, when these men are beset by clear testimonies of Scripture, and cannot escape from their grasp, they declare that the passage is spurious. The declaration only shows their aversion to the truth, and their obstinacy in error. Unable to answer these statements of Scripture, they deny their genuineness. But if this answer is admitted, or allowed to have any weight, it will be useless to quote any book or any passage against your errors. It is one thing to reject the books themselves, and to profess no regard for their authority, as the Pagans reject our Scriptures, and the Jews the New Testament, and as we reject any books peculiar to your sect, or any other heretical sect, and also the apocryphal books, which are so called, not because of any mysterious regard paid to them, but because they are mysterious in their origin, and in the absence of clear evidence, have only some obscure presumption to rest upon; and it is another thing to say, This holy man wrote only the truth, and this is his epistle, but

⁴¹ The sources mentioned in the previous footnote discuss this practice. Irenaeus, evaluating the 666/616 variant in Revelation 13:18, specifically mentions that “numbers also are expressed by letters” by “copyists,” which, he states, can easily lead to numerical confusion (*Against Heresies*, book 5, AN:XXX:1:7331).

⁴² AN:Footnotes:15:53032; AN:Footnotes:31:53048. Also note the Translator’s Introductory Notice to Peter of Alexandria, AN:52703-52706.

⁴³ NPN-1:Intro:15615.

some verses are his, and some are not. And then, when you are asked for a proof, instead of referring to more correct or more ancient manuscripts, or to a greater number, or to the original text, your reply is, This verse is his, because it makes for me; and this is not his, because it is against me. . . . Accordingly, should there be a question about the text of some passage, as there are a few passages with various readings well known to students of the sacred Scriptures, we should first consult the manuscripts of the country where the religion was first taught; and if these still varied, we should take the text of the greater number, or of the more ancient. And if any uncertainty remained, we should consult the original text. This is the method employed by those who, in any question about the Scriptures, do not lose sight of the regard due to their authority, and inquire with the view of gaining information, not of raising disputes.⁴⁴

Augustine states that the ultimate ability in a textual dispute to “consult the original text” remains an option. Had a statement such as this occurred in a writer two or three centuries earlier, one would naturally conclude that he referred to the MSS originally penned under inspiration; in light of the date of his testimony, it might be supposed that he referred only to the original language of the NT documents, rather than the common Latin Bible. However, the context militates against this possibility. Augustine is defending the legitimacy or spurious nature of textual readings, not translational accuracy. Furthermore, the original language would naturally be consulted in matters of Biblical interpretation long before one went through the much greater difficulty of acquiring and comparing “more correct or more ancient manuscripts” or “a greater number,” but here reference to the original is only mentioned “if any uncertainty remained” after first pursuing these other options. Such a reference to the original is the ultimate and decisive answer to the Manichean argument that “This holy man wrote only the truth, and this is his epistle, but some verses are his, and some are not.” If the “original” referred only to the original language, a resort to further more correct, ancient, or numerous manuscripts could be required, only now in Greek instead of in Latin. The

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NPN-1:XI:2:15785.

context makes it clear that Augustine makes the stunning assertion that, around A. D. 400, the original copies of the New Testament were still extant and available for consultation in the churches founded by the apostles.⁴⁵

God promised to perfectly preserve Scripture (Psalm 12:6-7; Matthew 24:35; etc.). Scripture has therefore been perfectly preserved, the Omnipotent's testimony superceding all requirements of historical testimony. Since the logic of preservation requires that the *Textus Receptus* is the preserved text,⁴⁶ the autographs represented a *TR* text, and the copies made from it were *TR* MSS. However, patristic testimony suggests that the original MSS, not to mention faithful copies made directly from them, were extant for centuries. Since even anti-Byzantine critics admit that the traditional NT text began by the fourth century its rise to unquestioned dominance, evidence that the *autographa* or copies made directly from it likely existed into that century eliminates the gap between the inspiration of the *TR* and the period of its unquestioned ascendancy.

VI. Patristic Testimony to Careful Copying Practices

Patristic declarations demonstrate that they inherited the apostolic concern for accurate copying. Polycarp declared that “whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord . . .

⁴⁵ He tells his Manichean opponent Faustus that “if he produces his own manuscripts of the apostolic writings, he must also obtain for them the authority of the churches founded by the apostles themselves, by showing that they have been preserved and transmitted with their sanction” (NPN-1:XII:4:15962). These churches would have the ultimately authoritative manuscripts. However, Jerome's letter to Pope Damasus in A. D. 383 gives no indication that the NT autographs had survived; it appears to presuppose their loss (*Prefaces to the Vulgate Version of the New Testament: The Four Gospels*, NPN-2:The Four Gospels:41486ff.). While authoritative MSS with very short lineal derivation from the autographs were very likely extant and available, unless MSS such as these satisfy Augustine's assertions, he is probably incorrect if he affirms the continued existence of the autographs themselves in his day.

⁴⁶ This essay is not the place to prove this presupposition. See *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, ed. Kent Brandenburg, El Sobrante, CA: Pillar and Ground Publishing, 2003, for a book-length treatment.

is the first-born of Satan.”⁴⁷ Concern for accurate copying and transmission of Scripture continued from his day on through the later periods of church history, so that, for example, the Council in Trullo (A. D. 692) decreed it “unlawful for anyone to corrupt or cut up a book of the Old or New Testament . . . or to hand it over for destruction to any other like persons: unless to be sure it has been rendered useless either by bookworms, or by water, or in some other way. He who henceforth shall be observed to do such a thing shall be cut off for one year. Likewise also he who buys such books (unless he keeps them for his own use, or gives them to another for his benefit to be preserved) and has attempted to corrupt them, let him be cut off.”⁴⁸ Tertullian argued:

Now, what is there in our Scriptures which is contrary to us? What of our own have we introduced, that we should have to take it away again, or else add to it, or alter it, in order to restore to its natural soundness anything which is contrary to it, and contained in the Scriptures? What we are ourselves, that also the Scriptures are (and have been) from the beginning. Of them we have our being, before there was any other way, before they were interpolated by you [heretics]. Now, inasmuch as all interpolation must be believed to be a later process, for the express reason that it proceeds from rivalry which is never in any case previous to nor home-born with that which it emulates, it is as incredible to every man of sense that we should seem to have introduced any corrupt text into the Scriptures, existing, as we have been, from the very first, and being the first, as it is that they have not in fact introduced it who are both later in date and opposed (to the Scriptures).⁴⁹

Alteration of Scripture by the orthodox to suit their purposes is unthinkable and “incredible”; no redaction, recension, restorative lower criticism, or any other forms of alteration are necessary, since “the unmutilated text of our own copy”⁵⁰ retained the “natural soundness” it had “from the beginning.” Any changes in the extant Scripture

⁴⁷ *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, AN:7:553. Irenaeus reports in his *Against Heresies* (Book 3, AN:3:5693) that “Polycarp himself replied to Marcion [the infamous corrupter of the NT text], who met him on one occasion, and said, ‘Dost thou know me?’ [with] ‘I do know thee, the first-born of Satan.’” Polycarp would certainly have given this pungent title to those who corrupt the words of Scripture, not to those alone who teach falsely.

⁴⁸ Canon LXVIII, NPN-2:LXVIII:85928.

⁴⁹ *The Prescription Against Heretics*, AN:XXXVIII:20377.

⁵⁰ *Five Books Against Marcion*, AN:V:XIII:24131.

were the exclusive province of heresy. Tertullian demonstrates both the importance the orthodox placed upon accurate copying and their affirmation of success in this endeavor.

Comparisons with the originals, or with known accurate copies, was a common practice for patristic works, and certainly for the Bible as well. For example, three Gallic bishops sent their copy of Leo's *Tome* back to him, requesting:

Therefore, if you deem it worth while, we entreat your holiness to run through and correct any mistake of the copyist in this work, so valuable both now and in the future, which we have had committed to parchment, in our desire to preserve it . . . so that not only many holy bishops our brethren throughout the provinces of Gaul, but also many of your sons among the laity, who greatly desire to see this letter for the revelation of the Truth, may be permitted, when it is sent back to us, corrected by your holy hand, to transcribe, read and keep it.⁵¹

The authoritative source was sought for, and when accurate readings from it were ascertained, further copies were made from the definitive replica.

Examples of careful copying of patristic writings indicate the nature of the replication that would have *a fortiori* been employed for the NT. The *Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp*, likely composed c. A. D. 155-160,⁵² was sent from “the Church of God which sojourns at Smyrna, to the Church of God sojourning in Philomelium,”⁵³ with the intent that after “ye have yourselves read this Epistle, be pleased to send it to the brethren at a greater distance, that they also may glorify the Lord, who makes such choice of His own servants.”⁵⁴ It was intended for widespread copying and distribution. Near the end, it reads, “Evarestus . . . wrote this Epistle . . . these things Caius transcribed from the copy of Irenaeus (who was a disciple of Polycarp), having himself been intimate with Irenaeus.

⁵¹ *The Letters and Sermons of Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome*, Letter LXVIII (NPN-2:II:73025). This letter was written at some point during his papacy, A. D. 440-461 (*A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, pg. 644).

⁵² “Polycarpus,” pgs. 846-850, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*.

⁵³ AN:Intro:661.

⁵⁴ AN:XX:701.

And I Socrates transcribed them at Corinth from the copy of Caius. . . . And I again, Pionius, wrote them from the previously written copy, having carefully searched into them.”⁵⁵ The record of scribal names and the mention of “carefully search[ing]” into the matters at hand indicate concern with the accurate transcription of this record of martyrdom. The Word of God would have received no less.

Irenaeus, writing c. A. D. 190 or later,⁵⁶ at the conclusion of his (now lost) treatise *De Ogdoad*,⁵⁷ stated:

I adjure thee, who shalt transcribe this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by His glorious appearing, when He comes to judge the living and the dead, that thou compare what thou hast transcribed, and be careful to set it right according to this copy from which thou hast transcribed; also, that thou in like manner copy down this adjuration, and insert it in the transcript.⁵⁸

This warning recalls the statement with which the apostle John closed the Revelation and the canon (22:18-19), and provides physical evidence that Irenaeus and his contemporaries took copying seriously.⁵⁹ If an uninspired and now lost patristic writing

⁵⁵ AN:XX:701-AN:XXII:707.

⁵⁶ “Irenaeus,” pg. 523, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*.

⁵⁷ The fragment appears in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:20.

⁵⁸ Cited in “Fragments From the Lost Writings of Irenaeus,” AN:I:7709; cf. *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History* (books I-V), 5:20, trans. Kirsopp Lake. Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁵⁹ This does not mean, of course, that every copyist in the ancient church period did a marvelous job. Jerome, writing to Lucinius (Letter LXXI; NPN-2:5:34465), states that “As for my poor works which from no merits of theirs but simply from your own kindness you say that you desire to have; I have given them to your servants to transcribe, I have seen the paper-copies made by them, and I have repeatedly ordered them to correct them by a diligent comparison with the originals. For so many are the pilgrims passing to and fro that I have been unable to read so many volumes. They have found me also troubled by a long illness from which this Lent I am slowly recovering as they are leaving me. If then you find errors or omissions which interfere with the sense, these you must impute not to me but to your own servants; they are due to the ignorance or carelessness of the copyists, who write down not what they find but what they take to be the meaning, and do but expose their own mistakes when they try to correct those of others.” Of course, this sloppiness is not at all excused or endorsed—and these men were copying Jerome’s works, not God’s Word. It is noteworthy that Jerome, at the end of this paragraph, says, “The new testament I have restored to the authoritative form of the Greek original,” when he had shortly before used the word “originals” to refer to the first copy of his own work from his own hand. Jerome elsewhere affirms that “study of holy scripture. . . . requires plenty of books and silence and careful copyists and above all freedom from alarm and a sense of security” (*The Letters of St. Jerome, Letter CXXVI, To Marcellinus and Anapsychia*, NPN-2:2:34964), prioritizing accurate replication of MSS, such as Jerome doubtless enforced among his “pupils devoted to the art of copying” (*The Letters of St. Jerome, Letter V, To Florentinus*, NPN-2:2:33809).

generated such a severe adoration, how much the more would copies of Scripture been replicated with tremendous care?

Rufinus, in his prologue to his translation of the works of Origen c. A. D. 400,⁶⁰ makes a similar, yet even stronger statement than Irenaeus:

And, verily, in the presence of God the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I adjure and beseech every one, who may either transcribe or read these books, by his belief in the kingdom to come, by the mystery of the resurrection from the dead, and by that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels, that, as he would not possess for an eternal inheritance that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and where their fire is not quenched and their worm dieth not, he add nothing to Scripture, and take nothing away from it, and make no insertion or alteration, but that he compare his transcript with the copies from which he made it, and make the emendations and distinctions according to the letter, and not have his manuscript incorrect or indistinct, lest the difficulty of ascertaining the sense, from the indistinctness of the copy, should cause greater difficulties to the readers.⁶¹

Elsewhere Rufinus, reiterating this warning he had made about alteration of his translation of Origen, declares:

Of this I solemnly warn every one who may read or copy out these books, in the sight of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and adjure him by our belief in the kingdom which is to come, by the assurance of the resurrection from the dead, and *by that eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels,*

⁶⁰ “Rufinus,” pg. 878-9, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*. NPN-2 states that this was the “Preface to the Translations of Origen’s Books Περὶ Ἀρχῶν Addressed to Macarius, at Pinetum, A. D. 397 (NPN-2:Preface:19909).

⁶¹ AN:Prologue of Rufinus:34705. The section of the prologue as found in the works of Rufinus, *Preface to the Translations of Origen’s Books* (NPN-2:Preface to the Translations:19912), reads as follows: “This only I require of every man who undertakes to copy out these books or to read them, in the sight of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and adjure him by our faith in the coming kingdom, by the assurance of the resurrection of the dead, by the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels (even as he trusts that he shall not possess as his eternal inheritance that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and where their fire will not be quenched and their worm will not die) that he should neither add nor take away, that he should neither insert nor change, anything in that which is written but that he should compare his copy with that from which it is copied and correct it critically letter for letter, and that he should not keep by him a copy which has not received correction or criticism, lest, if his copy is not thus distinct, the difficulty of the meaning may beget a still greater obscurity in the mind of the readers.” Alongside a number of less important differences, this latter version of the preface makes the imprecation clearly refer to the alteration of Rufinus’ translation of Origen, rather than Scripture, by changing what AN reads as “he add nothing to Scripture, and take nothing away from it” to the NPN-2 “he should neither insert or change, anything in that which is written.” The warning of the preface does indeed relate directly to Rufinus’ translation—which fits the context—rather than to the NT directly, as the quote above from the AN version might seem to indicate. Nevertheless, such concern provides an *a fortiori* argument for patristic concern for copying the Bible.

[emphasis in source text]— I adjure him, as he would not have for his eternal portion that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched, that he should add nothing to this writing, take away nothing, insert nothing, and change nothing.⁶²

Emphasizing the point yet further elsewhere, and adding a number of interesting details, including specific directions concerning accuracy in copying the very letters and punctuation,⁶³ Rufinus states:

In the sight of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I adjure and require everyone who shall either read or copy these books of mine, by his belief in a kingdom to come, by the mystery of the resurrection from the dead, by the eternal fire which is “prepared for the devil and his angels;” as he hopes not to inherit eternally that place where “there is weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and where “their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched,” let him add nothing to what is written, let him subtract nothing, let him insert nothing, let him alter nothing, but let him compare his transcript with the copies from which it is made, let him correct it to the letter, and let him punctuate it aright. Every manuscript that is not properly corrected and punctuated he must reject: for otherwise the difficulties in the text arising from the want of punctuation will make obscure arguments still more obscure to those who read them.⁶⁴

The extreme strength of these adjurations concerning copyist accuracy, with their expansive Divine imprecations and detailed copyist directions, points to a tremendous concern for faithful MSS transmission in Rufinus’ day. Copyists knew that alteration of the text was a crime worthy of eternal torment, something that by no means should be taken lightly.

VII. Conclusion

Since the God of truth has promised to preserved His Word, Scripture has not been lost or corrupted—in the *Textus Receptus* which underlies the KJV Christ’s

⁶² *The Apology of Rufinus*, Book 1, NPN-2:16:20031.

⁶³ Since other writings were punctuated, could Scripture MSS from this time (A. D. 398—see *The Letters of St. Jerome: Letter LXXX, From Rufinus to Macarius*, NPN-2:Intro:34540) have been punctuated as well?

⁶⁴ *The Letters of St. Jerome: Letter LXXX, From Rufinus to Macarius* (NPN-2:3:34543).

churches and saints possess a perfect replica of the *autographa*. While the inherent limitations of history make empirical demonstration of this proposition impossible, factual data can testify to its historical rationality. Scripture proves the immediate recognition of the Greek canon by the churches, and the early and widespread dissemination of NT documents. Post-Biblical patristic data suggest that the autographs, authoritative manuscripts immediately derived from them, and others only a few generations from the directly inspired originals, remained extant for centuries. Patristic writings also evince a widespread concern for copyist accuracy. These testimonies verify the presuppositionally certain safe passage of the Received Text from the original records of holy men of God moved by the Holy Ghost, through the ancient church period, into its medieval, reformation, and post-reformation textual dominance.

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