THE TEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN IN THIRD-CENTURY EGYPT

Recent years have seen the startling recovery and the publication of third-century copies of the Greek New Testament text. Some of these early copies are of considerable extent and are surprisingly well preserved. These new acquisitions are highly significant because they provide the textual resources for a fresh approach to the primitive text and the textual history, at a time when research has reached an impasse.

All of these new acquisitions are papyrus manuscripts and they offer direct testimony particularly to the text of Egyptian Christianity. Furthermore, these recent acquisitions include substantial texts from the third century, whereas the basic sources for earlier textual studies have been of the fourth century. The two latest acquisitions, of the Bodmer Library in Geneva, contain third-century texts of the Gospel of John and one of the Gospel of Luke, thus providing for the first time two primitive copies of the Gospel of John with substantial overlapping throughout chapters 1-14. It is this new condition that has suggested the present study on the text of the Gospel of John in third-century Egyptian Christianity 1).

We possess today about twenty-five papyrus copies of Greek New Testament text which were written as early as A.D. 300. Most of these are only small fragments and, prior to the recent publication of the Bodmer manuscripts P 66 and P 75, these fragments have rarely offered dual testimony to any part of the text. For example, there are four papyrus copies (P 1, 37, 45, 53) which contain text in the Gospel of Matthew. Three of these are short fragments and one (Beatty MS P 45) has fragmentary text through six chapters

(xx 24-xxvi 39). However, there is no significant textual variation where two witnesses become available. For another example, we may note that there are five papyrus copies (P 29, 38, 45, 48, 53) which contain text in the Acts of the Apostles. Four of these are short fragments and one (Beatty MS P 45) has fragmentary text through thirteen chapters (iv 27-xvii 17). Yet here again it is true that there is no significant textual variation where two witnesses become available. Other parts of the New Testament text (Mark, Luke, Pauline and Catholic Epistles, Apocalypse) also are represented among our third-century Egyptian papyri. Yet there is no substantial text in these parts where two witnesses become available from the third century.

The situation, however, has been significantly altered by the recent discoveries, with respect to the text of the Gospel of John. Since we now have two well preserved witnesses in the Bodmer manuscripts (P 66 and P 75) whose texts largely overlap through the first fourteen chapters of the book, it is now possible to consult two Egyptian Christian scribes for their extensive textual witness in the third century.

It would be premature to estimate the ultimate effect upon our critical text, and yet it is immediately clear that there must be a radical revision of textual method. For almost a century, since the researches of Tischendorf and Westcott and Hort, it has been the habit of textual critics to evaluate any newly discovered manuscript in terms of the fourth-century codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. When the Beatty manuscripts were discovered thirty years ago this traditional method was applied, despite the fact that the new witnesses were a century earlier than the standard employed. Other third-century fragments have been evaluated in the same customary manner, and consequently have been described as a textual “mixture” of recensions that belong to the fourth century. Surely this traditional method wrongly inverts the chronology of textual development, and leads to meaningless scholastic description, and obstructs the way to clear and constructive conclusion.

Now with the comparative testimony of two third-century texts of the Gospel of John (P 66 and P 75) we are released from this false inversion, and are now required to analyze the third-century testimony for itself. It follows from this that the highly regarded fourth-century codices which we have long known must themselves be