CHAPTER TWO
THE MAJUSCULE MANUSCRIPTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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1. DESCRIPTION AND NOMENCLATURE

It used to be common to describe this class of MSS as uncials. This usage has its origin in Mabillon’s interpretation of Jerome’s phrase about MSS written *uncialibus litteris*.\(^1\) Whatever the original meaning, a consensus has emerged that the name should only be applied to a particular kind of Latin majuscule.\(^2\) It is the word “majuscule” that should be used to designate the class of Greek hands of which I write. It means “of a fair size,” as opposed to minuscule, “rather small.” To attempt a definition of a hand given this name, one could specify a formal bookhand of a fair size in which almost all of the letters are written between two notional lines.

With regard to the class of MS of the Greek NT with which we are concerned here, there are three criteria that a MS must satisfy if it is to be included: script, material, and contents—majuscule in script, parchment as to material, and with a continuous text rather than lections (though the lections may be marked, in the margin or even in the text). If a MS in a majuscule hand is written on papyrus, then it is classified among the papyri; if it is a lectionary as to contents, then it should be classified among the lectionaries. There are about 270 lectionaries written in majuscule.\(^3\)

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Because of these three criteria, it could be argued that the designation “uncial” refers not to the script so much as to the whole character of the book in question. This usage is so common as to be almost universal. Nevertheless, it is palaeographically inexact, and we must learn to do without it. The term “majuscule” will be employed throughout the present study.

On the question of contents, it should be noted that a significant number of our MSS are bilingual. At present there are some eleven Graeco-Latin, twenty-one Graeco-Coptic, and two Graeco-Arabic majuscule bilinguals. The script and material of our MSS form a group reflecting various social, political, economic, and religious factors. Apart from our five oldest examples, they all come within a period delimited by two events. The first was the Peace of Constantine, and the innovation was a change from a preponderance of papyrus MSS to a preference for parchment, with a general adoption of biblical majuscule as the most common script. The demise of the majuscules coincides with an explosion in the production of written books in the tenth century that made it necessary to produce more books from the same parchment supply. The innovation here was the transition to minuscule scripts. But the transition was long, and it is arguable that some majuscules that have been dated to the tenth century should be redated to the eleventh or in at least one case even the twelfth.

2. The Majuscules in History and Scholarship

With the transition to minuscule, the majuscule MSS passed out of use. What happened to them? Professor Metzger draws our attention to the fact that “[i]nstances of a known copy of another MS are exceedingly rare, which suggests that only a very small percentage of MSS have survived.” Weitzman has produced a statistical model suggesting that “10% of all books now lost were still extant in A.D. 900.” With NT MSS produced in late antiquity,

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4 A list of all bilinguals is given in David C. Parker, Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 60–61. To my list of Graeco-Coptic MSS should be added 014 + l964a + l353b, 0276 + l962 + l353a, 0298, and 0299. Another list is provided in Bruce M. Metzger, Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Palaeography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56.


6 Metzger, MSS, 54.