The role of the internet in new testament textual criticism: the example of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is not only to discuss the role that Internet can play in relation to the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament, but also to explore some related issues raised by that role. At first, it must be said that the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament have suffered from a comparative neglect in New Testament textual criticism. This neglect has two main explanations: firstly, for a long time, New Testament textual criticism focused mainly or exclusively on finding the ‘original’ Greek text and indeed showed little interest in the ‘secondary’ versions of the New Testament. In this context, the Arabic manuscripts were discarded as useless, as is shown in Ewert’s comment: ‘Since the Arabic versions are so late, they are not useful as witnesses to the original text of New Testament.’ Secondly, the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament belongs to the general context of what we call today ‘orientalism’. This set of attitudes and prejudices was problematized by the scholar Edward Said in the 1970s and is discussed today in the field of cultural and postcolonial studies. The idea of the superiority of Western culture was also predominant in universities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and especially touched the Arabic language and Islamic traditions, with consequences for the study of Arabic Christianity and the Arabic versions of the Bible.

The fact is that since the extensive study by Georg Graf Die Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, published at the Vatican in 1944, nothing really important has been published until recent years. But this period of

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1 Ewert, A General Introduction to the Bible: from Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations, p. 171.
2 Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur.
3 For a more complete state of the research, see Kashouh, The Arabic Versions of the Gospels. The Manuscripts and their Families, 9–33, or my article Schulthess, ‘Die arabischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments in der zeitgenössischen Forschung: ein Überblick’.
disinterest seems now to be over. Indeed, in recent years, there is a large number of publications in this field, marking a resurgence of interest in the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament. I mention first the thesis of Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels*[^4] which is a huge work that classifies more than 200 manuscripts. Samir Arbache has already published *L’Évangile arabe selon saint Luc. Texte du VIIIe siècle, copié en 897. Édition et traduction*[^5]; the author has been working on this manuscript, the Sin. Ar. 72, for twenty years[^6] but it is the first time that a part of the manuscript is edited. Sydney Griffith also published on this topic, with a volume *The Scriptures of the People of the Book in the Language of the Qur’an*[^7]. These are only a few examples. So we may ask: Why the resurgence? What does it mean? Does this have something to do with the Internet? Can we find some answers to such questions on the Internet?

2. Digitization and Democratization

In general, we may affirm that New Testament textual criticism has been boosted by the rise of the digital era and the Internet. Claire Clivaz explains:

> Viewed in the second part of the 20th century as a subsidiary task, textual criticism is today one of the most rapidly expanding fields in New Testament studies, thanks notably to the ‘explosion’ of new manuscripts discovered or published online. David Parker has already drawn attention to the significance of computers and the new tools they provide for the present ‘dramatic change’ in textual criticism and the editing of the New Testament, but the extent of this change is still currently underestimated.[^8]

It is clear that the rediscovery of the Arabic versions participates in this renaissance of the textual criticism, a renaissance with several consequences. Digitizing the manuscripts and putting them online, but also enjoying an easier access to basic works of textual criticism in general,