Computer assisted collation of New Testament manuscripts

Timothy John Finney

58 Henning Crescent, Manning WA 6152, Australia

KEYWORDS: computer assisted collation, New Testament manuscripts, correctors

AFFILIATION: Baptist Theological College of Western Australia; Murdoch University, Western Australia.

E-MAIL: finney@central.murdoch.edu.au
PHONE NUMBER: + 61 9 450 4050

Abstract

From their composition in the first century AD until 1516 when the first printed edition appeared, the various books of the Greek New Testament were hand-copied. Over 5000 Greek New Testament manuscripts still survive, some dating back to the second century.

A major aid to constructing a critical edition of the Greek New Testament is a collation of significant MSS. To reduce the number of MSS included to a manageable level, only those which are significant for the reconstruction of the history of the text should be chosen. Here, this has been achieved by applying the simple criterion of selecting uncial MSS alone. This is a rough method, but is adequate provided that the chosen collation technique can readily admit newly identified significant MSS.

Fortunately, Peter Robinson has developed a flexible collation program called Collate. This is capable of including up to 100 MSS for collation against any chosen base text, and inclusion of additional MSS is simple.

The New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews was selected as a test case for computer assisted collation. There are 31 known MSS of Hebrews in uncial script, of which 28 are accessible. They have variable spelling, sparse accenting, punctuation and intra-word spacing, and utilise various short-hand devices such as nomina sacra contractions. Among them are highly significant MSS such as P46, 01, 03 and 06, along with representatives of a number of textual families, including the Byzantine. It is not unreasonable to expect these 28 to contain virtually the whole range of non-trivial variation found among all MSS of the Greek New Testament in Hebrews, although this expectation is yet to be tested.

Frequently, the MSS have been corrected by subsequent scribes. Most have one or two correctors, while some have none and a few have more than two. P46 appears to have five! Corrector information is important because its usual effect is to move a MS from one textual family toward another. As corrections are often the result of a scribe's quest to make a MS conform to an independent exemplar, a corrected MS deserves to be treated as a distinct entity. If each corrector's version is separated out, the 28 MSS give rise to over seventy different witnesses.

Transcription aims to encode information important to mapping trajectories in the history of the text, as well as the text itself. Which jot or tittle will eventually point to a relationship between MSS is not known before analysis of completed collations, so it is prudent to include as much information as might reasonably be thought important. In the main, this has been achieved by the use of tags, as recommended by Peter Robinson in the Collate user guide. In the interests of standardisation, it would have been better to use the TEI P3 guidelines for marking up the text. Some ramifications of this deficiency and possible solutions will be discussed.

My raw transcriptions produce a messy output from Collate. By contrast, the output is easier to understand when preprocessed transcriptions are fed in. A separate program was written to perform this preprocessing. Now, a verse can be specified and a clear collation prints out before our eyes!

The preceding outline shows that it is now possible for a personal computer to produce an elegant collation of significant Greek New Testament MSS using the Collate program with preprocessed transcriptions. This could prove useful to those who would like to have an understandable survey of variation within a particular section of text at their finger-tips. It may also provide a new path towards the goal of a comprehensive critical edition.