

THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT  
AND  
THE OLD SLAVONIC VERSION

Mr. Gary S. Dykes  
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The Old Church Slavonic version of the New Testament, though extant remains are no earlier than circa A.D. 1000, has value for determining the early and perhaps even the earliest Greek text of the New Testament. (for an example see note after the references).

In my terminology, I will use the abbreviation **OCS**—which being Old Church Slavonic—for the somewhat later and more diversified Old Slavonic manuscripts. Linguistically speaking the actual **OCS** language is scantily seen even in the oldest surviving manuscripts (typically of the four gospels, and several others [gospel-lessons, Psalters *et al*]). The original Old Church Slavonic quickly experienced some phonetic and morphological modifications to fit its wider environment of various speakers. Even the earliest surviving manuscripts show some adjustments towards certain forms of the various Slavic languages. These various forms have been termed *recensions* which term is not meant to imply an altered text as concerns its semantics or readings. These so-called recensions simply reflect the various phonetic and morphological alterations conformable to each specific form of Old Slavonic in use. Typically the forms are:

Bulgarian (Bulgarian-form)

Serbian (Serbian-form)

Croatian (Croatian-form)

Macedonian (Macedonian-form)

Old Russian (Russian-form)

In each of these forms of Old Slavonic, experts can detect the subtle morphological changes which suggest which of the above classes

of language are utilized. Even laymen can make some of these observations, when the basic paradigm forms are known and compared. However Mathiesen [Mathiesen - 483ff] cautions against using statistics generated from simple frequency counts of occurrences of forms. Mathiesen does use statistics, but in a more refined fashion. Simple frequency counts are not always dependable because:

- (1) A scribe may use a differing form because that is what is seen in his/her exemplar.
- (2) A scribe may vary from the hypothesized norm, for the sake of variety, or use one from memory.
- (3) A scribe's type of ~~OCS~~ is not always determined by his/her own vernacular. Cases exist (according to Mathiesen) in which a scribe uses a form other than his/her own vernacular.
- (4) Per the studies formulated by R. Jakobson, certain phonetic forms may change (exhibited in altered morphology) via a changing phonological environment. Combinations of sounds induce some changes; continuant paired with grave [note, Arlotto - 222f., also Lunt - 33] *et al.* Thus frequency counts alone, do not take into account these minor fluctuations due to evolving phonetic expansions and contractions as the text is implemented into another Slavic form (Serbian, Russian *et cetera*). These changes which are often predictable, nevertheless, are somewhat random and inconsistent as the grammars had not then been fully codified.

Thus, when one observes some occasional forms which suggest a Serbian-form (note: I prefer to use "Serbian-form" instead of "Serbian recension") one must not be quick to identify the language of

the manuscript as a Serbian-form of the **OCs**. Nevertheless, such observations can contribute to the overall analysis of just what form is used. Ornamentation styles, calendars, formats, religious biases, provenance, textual comparisons, colophons and many other features can all contribute to ascertaining the type of **OCs** employed.

For example we might observe the simple reflexive pronoun: **CA** (the vowel **-A** is pronounced like the *in* in "sin"). It serves as a reflexive pronoun, it can also turn an active verb into a passive, and a transitive verb into an intransitive [Schmalstieg - 281].

the **OCs** form is:            - **CA** (for the accusative)

the Serbian form is:        - **CE**

the Russian form is:       - **ЬЯ** (-ЬА or -ЬЯ both verbal suffixes, and both are enclitic forms of the pronoun **ЬЕЯ** or **ЬЕА**)

the Old Bulgarian is:      - **CA**

Many other variations can be displayed (such as the "jers") but such displays are beyond the scope of this introduction. But do note: in the above, the Russian pronoun is usually affixed to a verb, as one word, when this habit is observed, one may surmise that a Russian oriented scribe is at work, or the language is mixed Old Russian and other Slavic.

Simplifying the task of working with **OCs** texts is the fact that the **OCs** grammar coincides quite nicely with Greek. [Lunt in Metzger - 437f.]. It is not difficult to move from one language to another. **OCs** may in some respects be easier to master than Greek, as for example every stem of every declinable word ends in a consonant!

There are about seven existing true **OCS** manuscripts, **none** of them contain the Pauline epistles. The earliest known Old Slavic manuscript containing some or all of the Pauline epistles is the *Christinopolitan*, it is dated at circa XII<sup>th</sup>, (per Kałużniacki) and is of the Serbian-form. In Metzger's work (probably by Lunt) it is dated circa XI<sup>th</sup>. When we note the surviving manuscripts from the XI<sup>th</sup> century to the invention of printing, thousands are found! (most now reside in Russia).

Thus for the Pauline corpus, the earliest surviving manuscripts are about 200 or more years later than the work of Methodius and Constantine (a.k.a. Cyril). Yet since the manuscripts, invariably, maintain a very literal relationship with their Greek exemplars—we have on an *a priori* basis—accurate copies of the IX<sup>th</sup> century creations.

Despite the strong possibility that we have later, yet accurate copies; numerous scholars have reckoned the value of the **OCS** manuscripts as practically useless for clarifying the original Greek, and for establishing the earliest and best original Greek text. This overt error of omission has somewhat purloined the productive studies of these Old Slavic texts as concerns their relationships with the Greek New Testament manuscript tradition. One of the influential lobbyist's for the exclusion of healthy **OCS** studies has been the late Dr. Bruce Manning Metzger. Note this quote from one of his popular works:

...it goes without saying that this version, originating as it did in the ninth century, has little or no significance so far as an attempt to ascertain the original text is concerned. [Metzger - 430]

The late Horace G. Lunt also slights the potential impact of the **OCS** documents on page 441 in Metzger above. However Lunt does so by declaring that since its inception the **OCS** testimony has undergone constant revision, to accord with the "local Greek authority". Lunt has indeed examined some manuscripts, especially those of the Gospels, but research has yet to be done on the Pauline epistles, thus his remarks as concerns the Pauline corpus appears somewhat premature.

In the 1954 publication by the great versional scholar, Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, absolutely no mention is made of the **OCŠ**. In volume I, of *Institutiones Biblicae: Scholis Accomodatae*, 6th edition, published in Rome in 1951, only three paragraphs in its 584 pages mentions the **OCŠ**.

In a 1995 publication, giving the *Status Quaestionis*, or an overview of the present state of New Testament research, [E and H] the **OCŠ** version is not even mentioned! Though the Georgian and Armenian are—even Old Norse and Old Saxon are mentioned—but not the **OCŠ**! The first modern Greek New Testament to give some references to Slavic readings, is the UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> [s.v. UBSGNT in references]. However it is a very basic implementation.

For example at I Corinthians 1:13, the UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> indicates the Slavic as supporting the omission of the Greek negative  $\mu\eta$ . In doing so they would be relying on the *Sisatovac* Apostoloi, or the *Christinopolitan*, [s.v. their list of sources UBSGNT<sup>4</sup> - 28\*]. They indicate that both manuscripts **omit** the negative. They are wrong on both counts:

*Christinopolitan* reads:    **ѢДА** РАЗДѢЛИ....

*Sisatovac* reads:            **ЮДА** РАЗДѢЛИ....

They both have, "Has Christ been divided?".

In both cases, the negative is clearly seen - **ѢДА**. This particular negative represents the question forming aspect of the Greek negative  $\mu\eta$  very well.

In another example from the UBSGNT<sup>4</sup>, at I Corinthians 7:5, the apparatus indicates that both of their Slavic witnesses contain the word for "fasting", when in reality, the *Sisatovac* omits the word.

Generally speaking the UBSGNT is relatively accurate as far as it goes, it does not mention numerous other variations or Byzantine alignments. Many of the versional variants indicated in the edition show the various forms of the name "Jesus Christ", or "Christ Jesus" or "our Lord Jesus Christ", which variations are easy to spot in most any version of the New Testament—they also do not add to our grasp of the meaning of the Biblical text. Certainly experts Slavists can greatly improve the apparatus of the UBSGNT editions and indicate the individual Slavic readings on a manuscript by manuscript basis, and not grouping several manuscripts under one term or siglum.

In my opinion the **OCS** manuscripts of the Pauline epistles, are valuable and can be properly used to divine the Greek wording used in its (their) original inception. If this is true, then we can by just using several **OCS** manuscripts reconstruct the underlying Greek original. Here I remind the reader that the **OCS** translations are very literal, following very closely the underlying Greek semantics and structure. Most importantly, is the probability that this Greek original is itself an old Byzantine manuscript. Who knows how far back the **OCS** testimony can reach? perhaps as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century! This is possible, and remains yet to be validated (as to which century the MSS reach back to). One must recall that many of the earliest manuscripts in most Slavic regions have been destroyed; a sad reminder of the turbulent history of the Balkans. Assuredly Constantine and Methodius used a reliable Greek manuscript, and in A.D. 860 it is certain that very old Byzantine manuscripts still existed in Constantinople and elsewhere. As long as this is possible, why ignore the evidence? I suspect it is because of the bias generated by those who prefer the Egyptian recension, by those who wish to move beyond the powerful Byzantine text-type!

In Romans 15:19 we read:

in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Holy Spirit; so that from Jerusalem, and round about even unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ;

въ сімѣ зна́менїѣ ꙗ́коже, сілоу дѣла бж҃ѣа, ꙗ́коже мѣ ѿ іеру́салима  
и ѿкрестѣ да́же до иллу́рика испоблнити бл҃говѣствованіе хр҃тово.

[per the 1751 Elizabethan New Testament, Russian-form]

As mentioned in the above and in a few other New Testament passages, Paul did preach to those in Macedonia, and probably into what is now Albania. How far did he penetrate? Well, that depends upon the prepositions herein and below, ("unto Illyricum" - Greek *περὶ* which means "as far as"). Now Illyricum spans the northern coastal area of the eastern seaboard of the Adriatic Sea. This would be modern Croatia! Did Paul venture into these mountains of Illyricum? If not, he certainly was in sight of them. Giving us a bit more data would be Acts 19:21, 22 and 20:1-3:

Now after these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed **through** Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome. (22) And having sent into Macedonia two of them that ministered unto him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. [Acts 19:21, 22]

And after the uproar ceased, Paul having sent for the disciples and exhorted them, took leave of them, and departed to go **into** Macedonia. (2) And when he had gone **through** those parts, and had given them much exhortation, he came into Greece. (3) And when he had spent three months *there*, and a plot was laid against him by Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he determined to return **through** Macedonia.

[Acts 20:1-3]



We now see the prepositions for "through" as the Greek εἰς from which we can state that "into" or "through" would be appropriate—as well as "to" or "unto" grammatically speaking—on the basis of the Romans passage [Harnack - 92]. (Incidentally, the Slavic preposition ДО in the Romans text, means "to", or "as far as" a literal representation of the Greek περὶ).

In all probability, in about A.D. 56-57 Paul preached to the peoples of the region of Illyricum (or modern Albania). Paul certainly had translators with him, and the language he most likely encountered in A.D. 57 was Macedonian Greek probably up unto the Albanian Alps, and then northward he may have encountered the the now extinct Illyrian language (related to Messapic and Venetic and perhaps also Rhaetic) from which modern Albanian evolved.

Whatever impact Paul, the Apostle to the nations, had some 810 years before Constantine and Methodius, may be lost to history. For shortly thereafter the Latin missionaries—from the Roman occupations and from the northern Germanic folks—swept away the pure unadulterated truths which the Apostle Paul had espoused.

Adolf Harnack has done a fine job of collecting references to churches and Christian centers in the first 400 years or so after Jesus Christ. Below is an extract from one of his works:

#### § 12. MÆSIA AND PANNONIA, NORICUM AND DALMATIA <sup>2</sup>

On the soil of Mæsia (and of Pannonia, in part), while the Romans and the Greeks competed for the task of ruling and developing the land, the former gradually got the upper hand, and the province must have been counted as Western in the main at an early period. Here, too, we find from Acts of martyrs (under Diocletian) and the church's history in the fourth century, that Christianity had secured a firm footing in the third century. Even by the time that Eusebius wrote, however, the local churches (like those of Pannonia) were still young. At the dedication of the church at Jerusalem, he writes (*Vita Constant.*, iv. 48), the Mæsiens and Pannonians were represented by

"the fairest bloom of God's *youthful stock* among them" (τὰ παρ' αὐτοῖς ἀνθούντα κάλλη τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ νεολαίας). All that we learn from the Nicene subscriptions is that in "Dacia" (the country south of the Danube, modern Serbia) at Sardica there was one bishopric (Protopogenes, a Greek), with another (bishop Pistus) at Marcianopolis in Mœsia (near the shores of the Black Sea), but the Acts of the martyrs attest the presence of Christians at Dorostorum = Dorostolum = Durostolum (Ruinart, p. 570, and *Mart. Dasii*), Tomi (*Mart. Syr.*), Axiupolis (*Mart. Syr.*), and Noviodunum (in Mœsia Inferior; *Mart. Syr.*) previous to the council of Nicæa.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps there was also a bishopric at Naissus (Mœsia Superior) before 325 A.D.; the bishop was at the synod of Philippopolis.

One Pannonian bishop (called Domnus) was present at Nicæa (bishopric unknown). The Acts of the martyrs<sup>1</sup> tell us of Christian communities at Sirmium (*Mart. Syr.*, Ruinart, p. 432), Cibalis (*ibid.*, pp. 433 f.), Siscia (*ibid.*, p. 521; cp. Jerome's *Chron.*, ad ann. 2324), Singidunum (*ibid.*, p. 435),<sup>2</sup> Scarabantia (*ibid.*, p. 523), and Sabaria, the birthplace of Martin of Tours, whose parents, however, were pagans (*ibid.*, p. 523). "Very many years" (plurimi anni) had elapsed in 304 A.D. since bishop Eusebius suffered martyrdom at Cibalis; and as he probably perished under Valerian, this is our earliest piece of evidence for the existence of a Christian community in these regions. The diocese of the notorious bishop Valens at Mursa would also be ante-Nicene (cp. Socrates, *loc. cit.*). Even the distant Pettau (in modern Styria) had a bishop *circa* 300 A.D., and in Victorinus it had one who was famous as a theologian and author, well versed in Greek Christian literature. Pannonia was Romanized, but the last offshoots of Hellenism may have penetrated to this province.

It is extremely surprising how few bishops from Mœsia or Pannonia (even from the provinces mentioned under § 11) were present at Nicæa. Was the emperor indifferent to their presence? Or had they themselves no interest in the questions to be debated at the council? We cannot tell. Nevertheless, the fourth century saw a large part of the mental interchange between East and West realized in the church of one province, and that province was Mœsia.

Paul seems to imply that he visited Illyrian territory (Rom. xv. 19), and we are told that Titus went to Dalmatia (2 Tim. iv. 10). The wealth of inscriptions which have been discovered reveal a considerable amount of Christianity in Dalmatia, which may be held with great probability to go back to the pre-

Constantine period, particularly as regards Salona (martyrdoms also; cp. *Mart. Syr.*, and now *C.I.L.*, vol. iii., Supplem., Pars Poster.), where a local churchyard is traced back as far as the beginning of the second century (Jelic, in the *Röm. Quartalschrift*, vol. v., 1891; cp. *Bull. di archeol. et storia Dalmat.*, vol. xv., 1892, pp. 159 f.). The episcopal register of Salona can still be partially reconstructed.<sup>5</sup> Domnio was bishop of Salona, and was martyred there under Diocletian. He was followed by Venantius (before 312 A.D.), and shortly afterwards by Primus, whose epitaph has been discovered by Bulič. He is called “nepos [nephew?] of Domnio the martyr.” Four Christian stonemasons worked in the mines of Fruschka Gora, whither Cyril, bishop of Antioch, was also banished (cp. *Passio quattuor coronat.*, in *Sitzungsberichte der K. Preuss. Akad. d. Wissensch.*, 1896, pp. 1288 f.). No Christians, or at least extremely few, would be lodged in the Dalmatian islands, which were, as a rule, thinly populated (cp. Jerome’s *Ep.* lx. 10: “insularum Dalmatiae solitudines”).

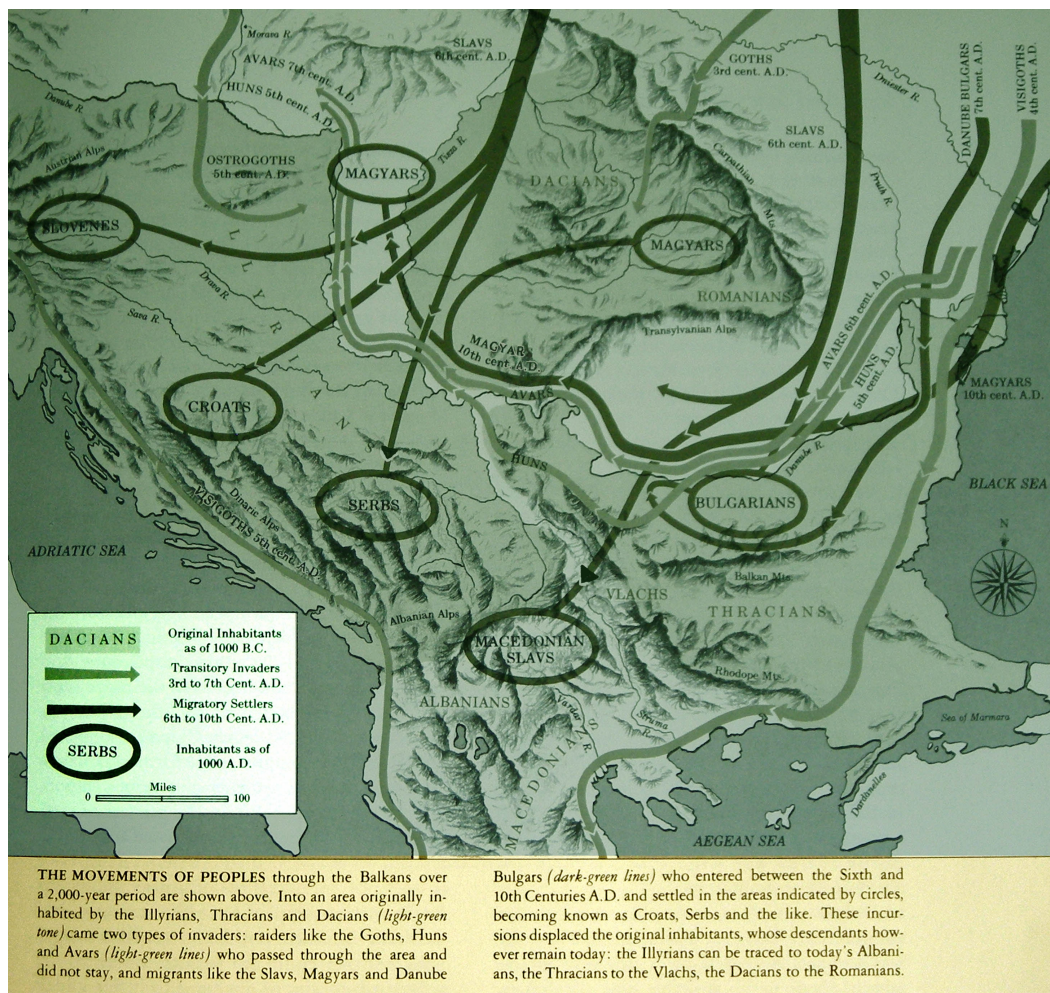
[Harnack - 236ff]

Perhaps some of Paul's distinctive teachings left a permanent mark upon the early history of the Balkans. However, as the following map illustrates, waves of various conquerors and immigrants radically altered the human landscape of the Balkans. It is well known that the Huns destroyed many religious centers, completely. The Turks showed no less mercy. Most ancient monasteries were destroyed, in fact to my knowledge, none of the pre-tenth century monasteries remain.

Even as late as the Serbian-Croatian war in the 1990s, Biblical manuscripts were lost, add to this the number lost during WWII (especially in Macedonia and Russia) and the numbers are considerable. Though the Magyar invasion in the 10<sup>th</sup> century stopped the future gains of the labors of Constantine and Methodius, subsequent wars have further reduced the number of the written remains of the earliest **OCS** manuscripts.

Despite the losses, our all-powerful God has preserved a few later manuscripts; manuscripts which retain a sound copy of the earlier works. In His Providence little or nothing has been lost!





Map borrowed from: *Life World Library, The Balkans*. Copyright © 1964, by Time Inc.. page 27. (Image has had some minor digital alterations).

The surviving **OCS** manuscripts (or later Slavonic) today number in the thousands. Very little research has been accomplished concerning them. I myself, am presently working with five **OCS** manuscripts of the Apostoloi. In my preliminary findings, I have noticed a fairly uniform text. Normally this suggests some common source. True. Yet one must also recall that the Greek Byzantine text-type itself is remarkably homogeneous. The real work is recognizing the earlier strata of readings surviving in the **OCS** texts. Workers who have a good grasp of the full diachronic aspects of the Byzantine text-type can see behind the **OCS** readings and see the remnants of the very early Byzantine text-type, perhaps as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, we have preserved for us today fine copies of the old Slavic version, a clear window to the text of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. It is probable too, that the underlying Greek, would illuminate that Greek "form" (dialect) as it was in Antioch and environs just prior to the work of the great missionaries.

Henry Cooper's observation [Cooper - 27] that no homogeneity is seen amongst the Gospel **OCS** manuscripts, may be due to his dwelling upon the differences due to the forms of the Slavic texts (Serbian-form, Russian-form, *et al*), one probably should not apply his view to the Apostoloi texts. There is much research which remains.

One example of some current research is that by Johannes G. van der Tak. He has collated numerous Apostolus manuscripts, specifically comparing the text of a selection of pericopes. The variations which he reveals seem somewhat minor, in contrast to the great deal of agreement between the commented texts and lectionaries which he uses. He groups the manuscripts into several categories, based upon their formats (Lectionary, Continuous or Commented). He confirms that numerous synonyms are employed and that several "redactions" seem to exist. He also confirms that the underlying Greek text is the Byzantine text-type. He would also caution against premature grouping of manuscripts, as more data is needed. In all he examines parts of 19 Old Slavic manuscripts, and if anything, reveals

the close relationship which all of the manuscripts have. Because he focuses on the variations, he often misses the vast uniformity.

Finally, it is worthwhile to recall that the Old Latin manuscripts did also reflect a literal translation technique, and followed the Greek original closely. They are grouped via observation of the use of various synonyms and other minor rendering variations. It is my observation that the **OCS** Apostoloi manuscripts (lectionaries and full texts) are also very uniform, most likely reflecting a single much older text-type.

When Constantinople severed itself from the Pope in Rome, territories were divided. The line of division passed through Serbia. The Western element represented by the Latin Church of Rome, the Eastern element represented by the Byzantine Church in Constantinople. The division divided the peoples of the South Slavic territories as well as the physical boundaries. East/West antagonisms are still felt today. But we should be thankful that much of Bulgaria and Serbia remained steadfastly Orthodox. Because of the steadfastness of the South Slavic peoples—in their devotion to translation of the Greek Scriptures, to writing and because of their devotion to learning—the gospel and Byzantine learning passed on to Russia, along with the Cyrillic alphabet. Russia, in the mid-900s, began to move out of the darkness of paganism! So now, for centuries via the Russian Synodal Bible, the Byzantine text-type influenced and influences millions of Slavs. This is not some accident of mere chance!

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#### NOTE

An example would be the reading of "Christ" at II Thessalonians 2:2. Most Greek Byzantine manuscripts read "Christ". However it is an early error. The original reading is "Lord" (day of the Lord). A few Byzantine Greek MSS retain "Lord".

The OCS MSS all read "Christ". This suggests that at the date of circa A.D. 850 during the work of Cyril and Methodius, some Byzantine scribes had already copied and recopied the corruption. Thus, we can conjecture that the corruption is early, pre-850 (Slavic translation date), and post-400 as the Syriac MSS read "Lord". (The Syriac version also utilized early Byzantine MSS). Thus I propose that possibly the corruption be dated as between A.D. 400 and A.D. 800. This is the range wherein the corruption entered the stream of Byzantine manuscript productions. At least this view has some historical validity. The Slavic MSS do assist with dating, and with **corroborating** early readings of the Biblical manuscripts.