

Manuscripts, Textual Variants, and Bible Translators

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The Bible Translator

64(2) 118–127

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DOI: 10.1177/2051677013491867

tbt.sagepub.com



Abstract

Among the contributions of Theodore Skeat (1907–2003) to biblical studies are several interesting papers on individual textual variants in New Testament manuscripts. Skeat's discussion of Matt 6.28, Mark 3.20, 7.3, 16.8, Phil 1.1, and 2 Tim 4.13 is reviewed from the perspective of the significance of these variants for Bible translators. The case of *deutero*prōtos in Luke 6.1 is discussed in more detail, and the different possibilities for exegesis and translation are presented.

Keywords

Textual criticism; variant reading; Theodore Skeat; Luke 6.1; *deutero*prōtos

Among Roger Omanson's many notable contributions to the cause of Bible translation his work on the Bible text in original languages deserves special mention. In his role as UBS Consultant for Scholarly Editions Roger served as UBS representative on the committees for both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, in the case of the latter taking primary responsibility for the Discourse Segmentation Apparatus.¹

Roger has played a significant role in making the results of textual criticism of the Bible accessible to translation teams around the world through a steady stream of articles,² through his authorship of several Handbooks for translators, and above all through his *Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (2006).

¹ The "Punctuation Apparatus" in the early editions of the UBS *Greek New Testament* was the work of Harold Greenlee, Robert Markham, and Harold Moulton (see the preface and introduction to the first edition of UBS GNT, vii, xxxv–xxxix, and Moulton's own account [1967]). Roger Omanson's initiative in replacing this with the present Discourse Segmentation Analysis is acknowledged in the preface to the fourth edition of UBS GNT, viii.

² See especially Omanson 1998.

This article is offered in grateful recognition of a much valued colleague and friend's achievements in the area of New Testament text criticism.

Some years ago a volume appeared under the rather workmanlike title *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat* (Skeat 2004). Theodore Skeat (1907–2003) spent almost his entire working life as a librarian in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum in London, and was a prolific author in several fields, notably classical studies and papyrology. The list of his publications runs to almost 100 titles. In his role at the British Museum he was also one of the first scholars to work on the Codex Sinaiticus, the famous Greek Bible manuscript purchased by the British government from the Soviet authorities in 1933,³ and he was responsible (with H. Idris Bell) for the editing and publication of the important apocryphal gospel manuscript now known as the Egerton 2 Papyrus.⁴

In the light of this it is no surprise that Skeat's work on biblical topics makes for fascinating reading. His interests range from studies of ancient writing materials and book production (including the vexed question of whether the copying of manuscripts was done primarily by eye or by dictation), the cost of papyrus (which he argues was in fact a relatively inexpensive material), and the transition from scroll to codex (which he links with the need for an artefact both practical and convenient enough to contain all four canonical Gospels).

Not surprisingly, several of Skeat's most substantial contributions in the field of biblical studies relate to the Codex Sinaiticus. In particular he writes with great erudition about the origin and subsequent history of the manuscript (and also of the other great fourth- to fifth-century codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus), and discusses in a most captivating way the possible link of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus with the edict of Emperor Constantine requiring the production of fifty manuscripts of the Bible.⁵

Not content with this, Skeat also published detailed studies on the Chester Beatty papyri, notably a technical codicology of P⁴⁵, and a widely discussed claim that P⁴/P⁶⁴/P⁶⁷ are all part of a single manuscript of the Gospels.⁶

³ A full account of this important manuscript may be found in Parker 2010.

⁴ Full information about this manuscript (including digital images, transcription, translations, and an extensive bibliography) may now be found at Wieland Willker's webpage "The Papyrus Egerton 2" (<http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Egerton>, accessed 21 August 2012).

⁵ A brief account of Constantine's instruction to Eusebius, with reference to the sources, is given in Metzger and Ehrman 2005, 15–16; for a general account of the significance of the Age of Constantine for the New Testament text see Aland and Aland 1987, 64–67.

⁶ The difficulties with Skeat's claim that these three papyri are not only the work of a single scribe, but also all part of the same single-quire manuscript of the Four Gospels, are outlined by Head (2005); much more technical detail is provided by Charlesworth (2007). For a comparative study of the text of the three manuscripts, see Wasserman (2010).

On the lighter side, Skeat's *Collected Writings* also includes a dramatised account of the possible formation of the Four-Gospel Codex, and a brief imaginative account of how the arrival in Constantinople of the fifty Bibles ordered by Constantine might have taken place.

Hidden away amongst all these riches is a small group of publications (section C in Skeat 2004) dealing with a range of individual textual variants, and it is to these that we shall now turn. In the light of Roger Omanson's particular interests and expertise, we shall be examining in each case the possible significance of the variant for Bible translators.

Some of the variants discussed by Skeat, naturally, are of less interest to translators than others. For example, the suggestion that μηδὲ ἄρτον φαγεῖν ("even to eat bread") at Mark 3.20 is a corruption of αὐτον μηδε φανηναι ("even to be seen") is surely too radical and too speculative to be considered as a possible text for translation. Although Skeat is able to refer to other instances of instability between αὐτου/αὐτων and αρτου/αρτων in Codex Sinaiticus and to offer a plausible account of how the other changes could have taken place, his argument nevertheless relies on a series of conjectures about what may have happened in the time before any extant text of the Gospel of Mark (and indeed in one place on a plain misunderstanding of the significance of "bread" as a synecdoche for "food" in the phrase ἄρτον φαγεῖν) and is unlikely to have any effect on the practice of translation.

The discussion of the reading οὐ ξενουσιν for ἀξάνουσιν in Matt 6.28 (in an article originally published in 1938), while fascinating in itself, is also unlikely to persuade any Bible translators to change their rendering of this passage. The point at issue is that the reading ου ξενουσιν (orthographical variant for ου ξανουσιν) was discovered by the use of ultra-violet light to be the wording of the original scribe of Codex Sinaiticus. This variant arguably gives a smoother sense in the context ("[how] they do not comb/card, neither do they spin or labour" in place of "[how] they grow; they neither labour nor spin"). It also has direct support from a non-canonical gospel papyrus fragment from Oxyrhynchus which was later linked with the Gospel of Thomas,⁷ and perhaps some very indirect support from the instability of the text in the Lukan parallel. In any case, as Skeat affirms, "it is clearly no scribal aberration, but the result of an acute piece of textual criticism." However, while Skeat's discussion certainly serves to shed light on a variant noted in the apparatus of both Nestle-Aland and UBS GNT, it would be hard to recommend following this reading in a modern translation (and it is not commented on in the UBS Handbook on Matthew). The reading of the

⁷ The rather extensive literature on this question is presented and discussed by Jongkind (2006). A perspective from the Gospel of Thomas may be found in Plisch 2008, 106 n. 1.

original scribe of Codex Sinaiticus is referred to in both editions of Metzger's *Textual Commentary* (1971 and 1994) and is brought to the attention of Bible translators in Omanson's *Textual Guide*; however, in the final analysis such translators should probably be guided by Parker's conclusion to his discussion of the issue, namely that while the story of this reading does create an undeniably romantic impression, in the end "there is more glamour than substance. We may continue to consider the lilies of the field, how they grow" (2010, 107).

The "Modern Greek" parallel which Skeat proposes (in a short note originally published in 1949) as an analogy for the ending of the Gospel of Mark at 16.8 (and therefore as additional confirmation for the shorter text) turns out to be a "metrical paraphrase of Genesis and Exodus by Georgios Chumnos of Candia, written about the year 1500" (which is not going to seem "modern" to any contemporary Bible translator!). The analogy, however, is indeed a striking one, as the poem ends with these words:

Λοιπὸν αὐτὸν ἐσκέπασεν, καὶ ὁ Μωϋσῆς ἐχάθη
Καὶ ἀπὸ τὸν φόβον ὁ λαὸς ὅλος ἐπαραπάρθη

Then [the cloud] covered him. And Moses was lost to sight,
and all the people were distraught with fear

This is (at least) an interesting contribution to the voluminous discussions about the ending of Mark which continue to occupy some Bible translation teams, particularly those working in areas where the longer ending is considered important for traditional or church confessional reasons. (Scholarly discussions about the various endings to the Gospel of Mark found in the manuscript tradition are conveniently summarised for Bible translators at the relevant place in Omanson's *Textual Guide*.)

Of more direct interest to translators is a short note on *πυγμαῖ* in Mark 7.3, where Skeat concludes that translators who choose to omit this word can feel justified. This is because the word *πυγμαῖ*, in Skeat's view, is "totally otiose," and may have arisen because of accidental repetition of *ἐὰν μὴ* which a subsequent scribe—unwilling to delete anything found in the manuscript being copied—chose to interpret as *πυγμαῖ* when he "tried to think of a possible word of about five letters ending in *μη* and somehow connected with hands or washing." This is an ingenious speculation (this time without any analogy in Sinaiticus or other manuscripts); it finds an interesting resonance in the recommendation of the UBS Handbook to omit the word on translational grounds ("since its meaning is not certain and the various alternatives only obscure rather than clarify") and in the variety of

attempts to make sense out of it found in different English translations (for example, NLT “until they have poured water over cupped hands,” and NIV “unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing”).⁸

A rather extensive “Note on Philippians 1.1” (1995) deals with the fascinating reference to bishops and deacons (“the only passage in the Pauline corpus which appears to recognise any form of church hierarchy”), particularly with regard to the testimony of P⁴⁶ as “certainly the most ancient surviving manuscript of the Epistle.” Undeterred by the absence of most of this verse from the manuscript through the loss of the bottom portion of the page, Skeat embarks upon a series of elaborate calculations of column heights and letter spaces which demonstrate that something must have been omitted, since the missing portion of the page may not have had enough space to contain the complete text of Phil 1.1. Whether it was the reference to bishops and deacons which was omitted, however, or another phrase from the same verse, is impossible to tell, and the (rather weak) conclusion has to be that “the result of our investigation must therefore be: *non liquet*.” Translators in any case are likely to be more concerned with finding meaningful renderings for the terms ἐπίσκοπος and διάκονος than with an argument from silence about their possible omission from one (albeit very important) witness.

Closer to the practical concerns of Bible translators is Skeat’s discussion of the term μάλιστα at 2 Tim 4.13 (“especially the parchments”). Skeat’s argument is that the meaning of μάλιστα is not in fact “especially,” but rather something like “that is to say”—in other words, in the context of this verse from 2 Timothy, equating rather than differentiating the βιβλία and the μεμβράναι, and requiring a translation something like “bring also the books—I mean the parchment notebooks.” Skeat is able to provide rather convincing examples of such usage from both within and outside the New Testament, and as Keith Elliott shows in his introduction to the Skeat volume (2004, xxi–xxiii) the suggestion led to lively scholarly discussion and was adopted in at least one standard commentary (Hanson 1982). Skeat’s interpretation of μάλιστα is mentioned with varying degrees of approval by Marshall 1999, Knight 1992, and Towner 2006, in each case with a fuller discussion at 1 Tim 4.10.

The possibility of understanding μάλιστα as something like “I mean” or “that is to say” is mentioned in the UBS Handbook *ad loc.*, with the comment that “this . . . suggestion is quite attractive but is not reflected in any translation consulted for this Handbook.” In the light of Skeat’s arguments

⁸ For a recent attempt to make sense of the use of πυγμή in the context of the rules for ritual washing of the hands see Crossley 2012.

and comprehensive documentation, however, together with the references in recent commentaries, translators may want to give more serious consideration to this rendering.

Perhaps the most productive example of the interrelationship between manuscript study, variant readings, and Bible translation among the examples dealt with by Skeat is provided by the case of the mysterious “second-first Sabbath” at Luke 6.1.

Let us begin by looking at the textual data. The fullest easily accessible account is given in the UBS Greek New Testament (fourth edition):

{C} σαββάτω P⁴ κ B L W f¹ 33 157 205 579 1241 it^b, c, l, q, r¹ syr^p, hmg, pal cop^{sa}, bopt eth // τοῖς σάββασι (see Mt 12.1; Mk 2.23) *Lect* cop^{bopt} // **σαββάτω δευτεροπρώτω**
A C D Δ Θ Ψ 0233 (f¹³ 28 1071 1243 δευτέρω πρώτω) 180 565 597 700 892
1006 1010 1292 1342 1424 1505 Byz [E H] it^a, aur, d, f, ff² vg syr^h arm slav
Epiphanius Chrysostom Isidore; Ambrose // σαββάτω δευτέρω geo // *sabbato mane it^c*

From this we can see that the attestation for δευτερόπρωτος is relatively strong, although geographically restricted. The main issue from the point of view of textual criticism concerns the extent to which the principle of *lectio difficilior* can be pressed: if such a difficult word were not originally present in the text it is hard to see why it should be added, but correspondingly easy to see why it might be deleted. The balance of opinion has been that a reading which is not only difficult, but frankly incomprehensible, cannot be considered original. The matter is not helped by the fact that δευτερόπρωτος is a *hapax legomenon*, unknown in Greek literature except for a few later uses which clearly derive from Luke 6.1 (the relevant texts are cited in the apparatus to Tischendorf’s edition). The entry in the standard dictionary BDAG is characteristic:

δευτερόπρωτος, on a word of doubtful mng., only in the phrase ἐν σαββάτω δ. Lk 6:1 v.l.; many editions (but not Tdf.), following most mss., omit the word or put it in brackets. Even many ancient interpreters, understandably, could make nothing of it (Jerome, Epistle 52, 8, 2), and it may owe its origin solely to a scribal error. It might correspond (but s. M-M.) to δευτερέσχατος (=next to the last) and mean **first but one(?)** (cp. Epiph., Haer. 30, 32; 51, 31 δευτερόπρωτον=δέύτερον σάββατον μετὰ τὸ πρῶτον; Eustratius, Life of Eutychius [MPG LXXXVI] ἡ δευτεροπρώτη κυριακή=the first Sunday after Easter Sunday), reckoned from Passover.

The difficulty of this word was known already at an early date. Jerome asked his teacher Gregory Nazianzen about it, but the latter threatened to

embarrass Jerome before the whole church by explaining it there, which was apparently taken to imply that he did not understand what the word meant either.⁹ Since then there have been numerous ingenious attempts to explain the use of δευτερόπρωτος.¹⁰

One possibility is represented by a range of theories suggesting that the phrase is some kind of a calendar reference (one of which is picked up in BDAG “the first Sunday following Easter Sunday” from Eustratius—and is also followed in the modern Greek and Russian translations).¹¹

Another possibility is to resort to emendation: for example, to read πρωι for πρωτω, giving the meaning “early on the second Sabbath,” with an appeal to other occasions in Luke when events took place early in the morning (notably of course the visit to Jesus’s empty tomb).

A variant of the chronological view is the perception that the phrase

must refer back to previous sabbath incidents in chap. 4; 4.31 could imply that Jesus went straight from Nazareth to Capernaum and taught there on the same day. The second sabbath after the first would then (on the analogy of Low Sunday) mean that the events of 6.1–11 occurred a week later. (Parker 1997, 33 n.)

A further possibility is that δευτεροπρωτω reflects a process of marginal annotation, subsequently incorporated into the text, referring to a suggested reordering of the various Sabbath incidents—specifically, to a perception that the account of the healing on the Sabbath (vv. 6ff.) should logically precede the account of plucking the heads of grain, with v. 5 “the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath” serving as a fitting conclusion to both passages. There are precedents for such suggested reordering in rabbinic commentaries on certain Old Testament passages (including the Song of the Sea in Exod 15).

The most commonly accepted explanation for this reading is that it is a scribal gloss: because this pericope is one of three consecutive Sabbath incidents in Luke, it is hypothesised that because of the reference to “another Sabbath” in v. 6 the word πρωτω was written in the margin, and that comparison with 4.31 led to a marginal correction δευτερω. Both words were

⁹ “My teacher, Gregory of Nazianzus, when I once asked him to explain Luke’s phrase *sabbaton deuteroproton* . . . playfully evaded my request saying: ‘I will tell you about it in church, and there, when all the people applaud me, you will be forced against your will to know what you do not know at all. For, if you alone remain silent, everyone will put you down for a fool!’” (Jerome, Letter 52, to Nepotian).

¹⁰ Most of these are conveniently summarised in Buchanan and Wolfe 1978.

¹¹ Το δευτερο Σαββατο μετα το πρωτο Σαββατο του Πασχα; В субботу, первую по втором дне Пасхи.

then incorporated into the text, and subsequently combined to form δευτεροπρώτω.

An ingenious variant of this suggestion is found in a 1988 article by Skeat (referring to an earlier proposal by Burkitt [1911, 80–81], and offered as the “final solution” to the problem). The conjecture is that the last four characters of σαββάτω were repeated by dittography over a line end, that the letters β and α were interpreted as numerals 2 and 1 respectively, and that the “ghost word” δευτεροπρώτω was concocted to spell out this interpretation of the individual letters. Skeat has an interesting example of a similar “ghost verb” *to morse* (for “to nurse”) which persisted through numerous editions of Sir Walter Scott’s novel *The Monastery*, and whose imagined etymology was discussed in erudite fashion in more than one learned journal. Skeat’s contention is that a similar scholarly mythology has grown up around δευτερόπρωτος.

For the purposes of this article it is interesting to note how this discussion has found its way into the guidance offered to Bible translators. The first edition of Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* reports that the majority of the Committee found the reading δευτεροπρώτω too difficult to be adopted (although rating their decision only C), and characterised it as “a *vox nulla* that arose accidentally through a transcriptional blunder,” the blunder in question being the copyists’ addition of πρώτω and subsequently δευτερω which we have already mentioned. The second edition of the *Textual Commentary* (Metzger 1994) drops the reference to the difficulty of the reading with δευτεροπρώτω (without, however, changing the C rating), reproduces the description of the supposed transcriptional blunder, and adds a reference to the proposal of Skeat, which had been published in the intervening period.

The *Textual Guide* prepared by Roger Omanson for Bible translators summarises with admirable clarity the information given in the second edition of Metzger’s *Textual Commentary*, and thereby also makes Skeat’s proposal accessible to the Bible translation community. Omanson further ventures a suggestion for how the enigmatic δευτεροπρώτω might be translated if this reading is followed (“a second sabbath after a first one,” which “may refer to the second Sabbath after the feast of Unleavened Bread, the first Sabbath being the one which occurred during the week of the feast itself”). Omanson also notes that this reading (and this interpretation) is followed in the French Traduction oecuménique de la Bible (TOB 1988; see also NTOB 2011): “on this date, close to the harvest, it is forbidden to eat grain from the new harvest.”¹²

¹² “A cette date, proche de la moisson, il est interdit de manger le grain de la moisson nouvelle.”

What Omanson does not reference, however, is the rather robust defence of the reading $\delta\epsilon\upsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\sigma\pi\acute{\omega}\tau\omega$ by the editors of the N/TOB. According to the footnote *ad loc.*, the expression “is found in numerous witnesses. It corresponds to a well-known Jewish formula . . . [it] is certainly ancient and probably original in the text.”¹³ This positive evaluation goes well beyond what is available to the users of the major English translations, but given the prestige of the N/TOB as a source text for Bible translators in francophone areas it is quite likely to influence their practice.

Translators basing themselves on French sources will also surely give attention to the detailed footnote provided by the editors of the recent *Nouvelle Bible Segond*, explaining what could be behind this “mysterious adjective”: a priestly calendar from Qumran, a reference to the prohibition against eating the grain of the new harvest (as in N/TOB), a scribal addition making a link with the Sabbath mentioned at 4.31 (see also the discussion of this verse above).¹⁴

Although in this instance the issue turns on more or less ingenious speculation about what might lie behind the text as it is preserved in a number of witnesses, it does indicate the way in which the discussion of manuscript readings and textual variants may enter the discourse of Bible translation and have a practical influence on the way in which translators do their work.

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¹³ “Les deux adjectifs se trouvent chez de nombreux témoins. Ils correspondent à une formule juive connue. . . . Cette donnée, qui correspond aux usages du judaïsme et qui est bien en situation ici, est sûrement ancienne et probablement originale dans le texte.”

¹⁴ “Certains mss ajoutent un adjectif mystérieux, *deuxième-premier*, que quelques-uns ont tenté d’expliquer à partir d’un calendrier sacerdotal en vigueur à Qumran. . . . D’autres comprennent *le deuxième sabbat du premier mois* (où il était interdit de manger le grain de la nouvelle récolte). . . . D’autres enfin y voient un ajout de certains copistes, cherchant à exprimer un rapport au sabbat mentionné en 4.31.”

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Bible versions cited

NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
TOB/NTOB	(Nouvelle) Traduction oecuménique de la Bible
UBS GNT	UBS Greek New Testament