

Lonnie D. Bell, *The Early Textual Transmission of John: Stability and Fluidity in Its Second and Third Century Greek Manuscripts*, NTTSD 54; Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. xi + 265. ISBN 9789004361638. Hardcover, €110.00 / \$127.00.

- [1] In New Testament textual scholarship, there is an influential claim stating that the character of New Testament manuscripts in the earliest centuries is “free” and “fluid,” especially in comparison with those copied from the fourth century onward. But, is such a claim valid? By examining the fragmentary Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of John in the second and third centuries, the current volume of the series *New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents* (NTTSD) offers a clear answer to that question.
- [2] This volume is a revised edition of the author’s doctoral dissertation, defended in 2015 at the University of Edinburgh.¹ It contains a chapter of introduction, three chapters of the examination of the manuscripts under consideration, and the final chapter of conclusions. These are followed by a bibliography and four indices concerning authors, subjects, manuscripts, and biblical passages.
- [3] The first chapter (pp. 1–33) addresses the question and defines this study’s method and scope. It begins with a survey of four major approaches for studying the earliest New Testament papyri (pp. 1–7), namely the approaches by Eldon J. Epp, Babara Aland, Kyoung Shik Min, and James Royse. The author then turns to his research question and the approach to be used. The research question is: “Do we see greater care and stability in copying in the later period (fourth through seventh centuries) than in the early period (second and third centuries)?” (p. 16). To answer this, Bell proposes that one should go to the earliest extant manuscripts, which “are the most relevant and direct evidence for addressing the issue of transmission character in the earliest centuries” (p. 12). The Gospel of John is selected as a case study since it is the most representative New Testament book among the second- and third-century manuscripts. A twofold approach is applied to examine these data (pp. 14–16). First, assessment of fluidity and stability of the manuscripts is based on internal evidence, in particular assessing through the “internally improbable readings” of the manuscripts addressed. In contrast to other approaches using a critical text to detect “deviations,” this study analyses those “improbable readings” in relation to “the other variant(s) attested at variation-units” (p. 15). The second component of Bell’s approach is to compile a dataset of “Diachronic Comparison of Created Readings,” which compares the unique readings in a given manuscript with “all of the majuscules up through the seventh century that

¹ The title of the dissertation is slightly different: “Textual Stability and Fluidity Exhibited in the Earliest Greek Manuscripts of John: An Analysis of the Second/Third-Century Fragments with Attention also to the More Extensive Papyri (P45, P66, P75)”; cf. <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/11768>. The first supervisor is Larry W. Hurtado and the second Sara Parvis. In comparison with the dissertation, the current volume bears a different title for the last chapter (“Results and Implications” instead of “Conclusions”) and has additional indices.

share complete overlap with it” (pp. 15–16). This will use to test whether later manuscript traditions are more stable than earlier ones.

- [4] Before moving to examine the data, another issue related to the scope is discussed in the section “Rethinking Some ‘Free’ Texts” (pp. 17–32). Among the manuscripts of John in the second and third centuries, Bell mainly focuses on fourteen fragments and excludes three extensive papyri: P⁴⁵, P⁶⁶, and P⁷⁵. The reason for the exclusion is that they “go beyond the scope of the full-scale analysis that I apply to each manuscript in this study” (p. 17). This section reconsiders the characterisation of these papyri, especially ⁴⁵ and ⁶⁶. Although the scribes of both papyri were regarded as “free” and “wild” by previous scholarship such as Ernest C. Colwell, Bell points out that in recent years scholars have softened and corrected such expressions.² Thus, ⁴⁵ and ⁶⁶ should not be considered holding significant “wildness” character as scholars once supposed.
- [5] As the main body of this study, chapters 2–4 examine fourteen fragments containing the Fourth Gospel. The chapter division is made according to whether the manuscript is overlapped with P⁶⁶ and/or P⁷⁵: manuscripts without full overlap in P⁶⁶ or P⁷⁵ are covered by chapter 2, then chapter 3 on those with full overlap in P⁶⁶, and chapter 4 those with full overlap in both papyri.
- [6] The second and the longest chapter (pp. 34–161) analyses nine papyri: P⁵², P⁹⁰, P¹⁰⁷, P¹⁰⁸, P¹⁰⁹, P¹²¹, P⁵, P²², and P²⁸ respectively. It is followed by the examination of P⁹⁵ and P³⁹ in chapter 3 (pp. 162–180) and the examination of P¹⁰⁶, P¹¹⁹, and one parchment 0162 in chapter 4 (pp. 181–225).³ Each papyrus is treated almost in the same way, following this particular sequence: Introduction, Variation-Units Represented, Unique Readings, Commentary on Variants, Commentary on Unique Readings, Analysis of Manuscript based on Readings, Diachronic Comparison of Created Readings, and Conclusions on Stability and/or Fluidity. Take the lengthy analysis of P⁵ for example. P⁵ (P.Oxy. II 208 and XV 1781; third century) is examined in § 2.7 (pp. 109–139). First an introduction to the papyrus is provided, including its content, codicological information, dating, style of hand, and presence or absence of *nomina sacra*, diacritics, and punctuation. Orthographic variations are also mentioned but excluded in the following analysis. Then there is a table concerning the variant-units in the portion of the manuscript (P⁵ containing John 1:23–31, 33–40; 16:14–30; 20:11–17, 19–25), and here about forty variant-units are analysed.⁴ In the table one column lists variants attested in different manuscripts, accompanying with another column that provides the transcription of the papyrus (generally based

2 The most frequently cited work in this section is James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, NTTSD 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

3 Note that Bell excludes P⁸⁰, a fragment dated to the third century in the *Liste*, since it is considered “as too late or at least too questionable” (p. 14 n. 57). The main reason is that the papyrus is dated to the sixth century (or more precisely 550–600 CE) by Pasquale Orsini and Willy Clarysse, “Early New Testament Manuscripts and Their Dates: A Critique of Theological Palaeography,” *ETL* 88 (2012): pp. 443–474; here pp. 459–460, 471.

4 The examined variant-units mainly follow those in NA²⁸ with some additions.

on the *editio princeps*).⁵ After this is a similar table on the unique readings found in ⁵, concerning five variants (1:37, 38, 40; 16:27; 20:16). Based on these two tables, comments on every variation are then provided, with a focus on possible reasons of the variant under discussion (e.g. harmonisation, grammatical improvement, smoothing text, and scribal errors). All these micro-level analyses are put together to give an overall assessment of the papyrus. According to Bell, twenty-five (74%) of the variants in P⁵ are “internally more probable” and only nine are “intrinsically and/or transcriptionally less probable” (p. 135). Even these improbable readings, he further claims, can mainly be explained by either scribal slips or unconscious influences from immediate or familiar context. As mentioned above, another dataset is compiled from the “Diachronic Comparison” method. At this point \aleph 01, A02, and B03 are selected since they contain portions that fully overlap with that of ⁵. The singular/sub-singular readings of each majuscule are listed (nine in \aleph [01], two in A[02], and one in B[03]). In comparison with five unique variants rendered by P⁵, both the quantity and the types of readings are not extraordinary in this third-century papyrus. Therefore, this fragment “does not offer its support for the view that laxity, carelessness, or willingness/openness to change the text marked the early centuries of transmission” (p. 139).

- [7] Like the treatment of ⁵, all other thirteen fragmentary manuscripts receive the same thorough examination.⁶ According to the author, the majority of them (P²², P²⁸, P³⁹, P⁵², ⁹⁰, P¹⁰⁸, P¹⁰⁹, P¹²¹, and 0162) do not show a high level of fluidity but rather demonstrate continuity with later manuscript traditions. Concerning the remaining papyri (P⁵, P⁹⁵, P¹⁰⁶, P¹⁰⁷, and P¹¹⁹), although at first sight they seem to contain some significant variants, Bell insists that most of the readings are the results of unconscious or minor assimilation. These findings are summarised and synthesised in the brief concluding chapter (pp. 226–235). In it he returns to the main question and answers confidently that the evidence gathered here does *not* support the widely-accepted claim that the manuscripts in the earliest centuries are freer and more fluid than those in the following centuries.
- [8] The first and foremost strength of this study is that Bell addresses a crucial question and provides a well-conducted answer to it. The witnesses under examination (i.e. the fourteen fragments) indicate that the variants attested in the earliest extant papyri are not unique and less careful than the majuscules in later centuries. In contrast, his endeavour shows that “continuity” is a better characterisation for these fragmentary manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel.
- [9] Furthermore, the structure is very clear and easy to follow. The treatment of each manuscript can be seen as a separate text-critical commentary, containing valuable information such as judgement and evaluation of every variant occurred, proposals of possible origins, comments on scribal habits. The author examines the papyri closely and also shows his own text-critical decisions and

5 The given transcription is actually the readings after correction in P⁵.

6 Relevant variants from P⁶⁶ are included in the manuscripts examined in chapter 3, and in chapter 4 both P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵ are included for comparison.

- familiarity with relevant secondary literature (see for instance pp. 77–78 nn. 156–157 on John 17:1 in P¹⁰⁶; pp. 152–154 n. 406 on John 6:17 in P²⁸).
- [10] Another advantage is that, although collecting and analysing a great amount of data, rigorousness runs throughout the volume. Not only does Bell mention related variants and works in proper places, but he also holds a very high level of accuracy. I only spotted a few typos: p. 85 n. 172 l. 4: o (omicron)] o; p. 121 n. 318 ll. 1–4 seems better to be two sentences instead of one; p. 127 l. 3 in the last paragraph: vv.] v.; p. 181 n. 1: the comma before “11–14” is missing; p. 183 in the row on “1:30 υπερ”: υ (upsilon)] u, and in the row on “1:32 καταβαινον ως περιστεραν”: ο (omicron)] o.⁷
- [11] However, I would like to draw attention to several points that may affect the overall presentation of Bell’s work. First, as said, this study excludes P⁴⁵, P⁶⁶, and P⁷⁵, though the latter two are occasionally discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Understandably, with regard to the scope of a dissertation selectivity is unavoidable, but such exclusion may make the data less representative and thus influence the outcome. Admittedly, it seems not realistic to apply the author’s approach to the whole portions of P⁶⁶, and yet to take some sample chapters from it as well as a more in-depth analysis of P⁴⁵ would have made the conclusion more persuasive.⁸
- [12] Moreover, there are a number of manuscripts that do contain significant variants, but according to Bell they do not support the characterisation of freedom and fluidity. Instead, many of these readings are attributed to unconscious assimilation and accidental changes. Repeatedly a given variant is regarded as harmonised to the context or similar texts and accordingly should be excluded from the category of “intentionally improbable readings.” But, can all the harmonisation efforts in every papyrus be seen as probable readings? I wonder whether there are different levels of probability to be differentiated. If so, this may give us a “less-clean” picture than the author has depicted.
- [13] Besides, this study has a drawback that may be worthy to mention, that is, that the cited works are all prior to 2014 (except for the second edition of SBLHS). Some relevant works published afterwards are not included, for instance Scott Charlesworth’s monograph⁹ and Zachary Cole’s dissertation.¹⁰ Further, it is

7 Besides, in p. 195 n. 45 a somewhat unusual short title is given to *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Part LXXI, 1–6.

8 Here I share a similar concern with Paul Foster in his recent review in *JSNT* 41.5 (2019): pp. 119–120.

9 Scott D. Charlesworth, *Early Christian Gospels: Their Production and Transmission*, Papyrologica Florentina 47 (Florence: Edizioni Gonnelli, 2016). Bell consistently refers to Charlesworth’s earlier works in the introduction part of the papyri addressed.

10 Zachary J. Cole, *Numerals in Early Greek New Testament Manuscripts: Text-Critical, Scribal, and Theological Studies*, NTTSD 53 (Leiden: Brill, 2017). Cole defended his dissertation in 2016, also at the University of Edinburgh. This study could have contributed to Bell’s discussions about the using of numerals (e.g. p. 209).

somewhat surprising that there is no comment on P¹³⁴, the latest papyrus of John registered in the online *Liste*.¹¹

- [14] To conclude, this volume provides detailed studies on the fourteen fragmentary manuscripts of John in the second and third centuries. Important evidence is drawn up from these witnesses to challenge the widely-claimed characterisation of the transmission of the New Testament text in the earliest period. Although he may not convince every reader, Bell does offer a solid model to deal with this important issue. Future research, preferably including more extensive papyri as well as different New Testament books, would be more than welcome to either confirm or redefine his thesis.

An-Ting Yi
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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11 The full examination of P¹³⁴ (Geoffrey Smith, “The Willoughby Papyrus: A New Fragment of John 1:49–2:1 [P134] and an Unidentified Christian Text,” *JBL* 137 [2018]: pp. 935–958) must have appeared too late for Bell to consult. But already at the end of 2015 the papyrus received its GA number and was drawn attention to the scholarly world.