

A TEXT-CRITICAL NOTE TO EZEKIEL 1: ARE SHORTER READINGS REALLY PREFERABLE TO LONGER?

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A convention of modern Biblical textual criticism is that a short reading of a given text is normally to be preferred over a longer variant. This convention was given classic expression by its originator, Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745-1812), as follows:¹

The shorter reading (unless it lacks entirely the authority of the ancient and weighty witnesses) is to be preferred to the more verbose, for scribes were much more prone to add than to omit. They scarcely ever deliberately omitted anything, but they added many things . . . through errors of the eye, ear, memory, imagination, and judgment.

These views are repeated by virtually all modern authorities, including Bruce Metzger,² Everett F. Harrison,³ W. G. Kümmel,⁴ David F. Payne,⁵ and by Ralph W. Klein, who states:⁶

Unless there is clear evidence for homoeoteleuton or some other form of haplography, a shorter text is probably better. The people who copied manuscripts expanded the text in several ways: they made subjects and objects of sentences explicit whereas they were often only implicit in the original text; they added glosses or comments to explain difficult words or ideas; and when faced with alternate readings in two or more manuscripts they were copying, they would include both of them (conflation) in a serious attempt to preserve the original.

Given the axiomatic, conventional character that this preference for shorter readings has acquired, it is understandable that it has seldom if ever been subjected to inductive testing during the last two hundred years. However, it may be even more worthwhile to test universally accepted axioms than to test controversial theories, for the former are generally much more foundational to scholarly work and therefore their truth or falsity makes much more of a difference for the

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¹Cited by B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (2d ed.; Oxford: University Press, 1968) 120.

²Ibid., pp. 209-210.

³E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 86.

⁴W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 386.

⁵D. F. Payne, "The Text and Canon of the New Testament," in *A New Testament Commentary* (ed. G. C. D. Howley; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969) 27.

⁶R. W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 75.

validity of established scholarly conclusions. The present study is intended as a modest beginning at the task of inductively testing the preference for the short reading.

The basis for this study is the even more primary convention of modern textual criticism: "Choose the reading which best explains the origin of the others."⁷ This would suggest that wherever scribal activity has created a long reading from a short original, a plausible reason must exist to explain the change. Normally, this is not difficult; in the case of most narrative material, the scribe can be thought to have had additional information or tradition supplementing the canonical data, which he can then be assumed to have added to the text. Alternatively the scribe can be assumed to have been able to form a common-sense mental picture of the events described in his text, based on his knowledge of normal probabilities, and to have then added words based on this picture wherever he felt that the original text was not sufficiently clear for the reader. Similar motives can be plausibly suggested for the creation of long readings in first-person speeches. Given the degree of compositional freedom ancient writers sometimes took in drafting these,⁸ it is not impossible to argue that compositional freedom may well also have been exercised at the copying stage.

There are a few pericopes in the canonical literature, however, where these potential explanations cannot be invoked. One of these is the account of Ezekiel's inaugural prophetic theophany in Ezek 1:1-2:2.⁹ This text is primarily a physical description of an unearthly vision with a number of unique, even bizarre, features, not seen by anybody except Ezekiel and not paralleled anywhere else in any extant writing (except for a similar theophany in Ezekiel 10, which is also seen by nobody except Ezekiel). If scribes copying the account of this vision created longer readings at various places in the text, then their activity has to be explained solely in terms of causes objectively demonstrable in the written account itself. None of the scribes would have had any account of this vision independent of the original writing, and none would have had any common-sense picture of the "living creatures" and their "wheels" to resort to in "clarifying" the text. They would have had no clearer idea of the physical appearance of these phenomena than any other reader. This greatly limits the range of subjective explanations that could potentially be used to explain away any longer reading.

A comparison of the text of Ezek 1:1-2:2 in MT and in LXX¹⁰ discloses sixteen clear textual variants. Of these, four involve differences that have nothing to do

⁷Ibid., p. 74.

⁸Harrison, *Introduction* 247-248.

⁹The oracle in Ezek 2:3-3:11 is also part of the account of the prophet's inaugural theophany, but it is excluded from this study for the reason alluded to above: It could be argued that scribes may have felt free, and competent, to add to the texts of first-person speeches, and for this study we need to work with material where no such free addition can be alleged.

¹⁰As printed, respectively, in the *Hebrew Old Testament* (ed. N. H. Snaith; London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1979) and in *The Septuagint Version: Greek and English* (ed. Sir L. C. L. Brenton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

with length. But in the remaining twelve instances, one witness presents a longer reading: 1:3, 1:8-9, 1:11, 1:14 (where LXX lacks the entire verse), 1:15, 1:16, 1:20, 1:24, 1:25, 1:26, 1:27, 2:2. Our first question: Can these long readings be explained on the assumption that it is the shorter ones that are original?

Dittography is an obvious potential mechanical cause for a secondary long reading. Several of the long readings in the MT version of this passage do seem to result from this cause. In 1:11 the reading *ûpênêhem*, with which MT begins the verse but which is not translated in LXX and has no syntactic relationship to what precedes or follows,¹¹ is most unlikely to be original. The verse above begins with the word *ûpênê*, while the second word in 1:11 itself is *wêkanpêhem*. The potential for dittography (and for metathesis of the *n* and the *p*) is obvious. A less obvious but still possible dittography may appear in 1:16. Here the word *û-mă'asêhem* appears in MT in both 1:16a and 1:16b, but LXX translates it only in 1:16b (as "and the work of them"). Depending on the size of the scroll, the word could have appeared just below the part of 1:16a that a scribe was copying, allowing his eye to jump to the lower line and so to mistakenly introduce the word into 1:16a. MT, but not LXX, repeats the conclusion of 1:24, "when they stood still, they let down their wings," as the conclusion of 1:25, and repeats the opening words of 1:25, "And above the firmament that was over their heads," as the opening words of 1:26. It seems more than likely that in both cases the repetition could have been caused by a scribe's mistaking the conclusion/opening of one verse for that of the one just above it. Finally, where in 1:20 the words *hârûaḥ lāleket* appear twice in the same line of text in MT, but where the LXX translates the phrase only once, dittography seems to be a plausible explanation. These cases exhaust the possibilities of dittography.

Another of the long readings, that in 1:15 where MT but not LXX supplies the object "the living creatures" for the verb "I beheld," is also easily explicable as secondary. The object is implied by the short reading, would easily have been understood by subsequent scribes, and would be the sort of information one or more of them might well make explicit in the interest of greater clarity.

This, however, leaves six long readings not accounted for by either of these explanations. There is no evidence for textual conflation in the case of any of them. Can they plausibly be explained as "glosses or comments to explain difficult words or ideas"¹² (the remaining explanation adduced for the creation of longer readings)? Let us examine them one by one.

(1) 1:3: MT reads, "The hand of Yahweh was upon him there"; LXX reads, "The hand . . . upon me." Ignoring the difference in pronoun as a variant of a different nature than that being studied here, we have one witness that reads "there" and one that does not. In the text where it appears, the word in its context is almost redundant. It adds so little to the sentence that it is very difficult to imagine a scribe thinking that its insertion would clear up a difficulty.

¹¹The phrase is literally "And their faces," with no connection to any verb. *KJV* translates it as "Thus (were) their faces," but since I know of no other instance in which the Hebrew connective was used in the sense of "thus" I am unable to regard a translation in that sense as lexically justified.

¹²Klein, *Textual Criticism* 75.

(2) 1:8-9: After “under their wings . . . they had human hands,” MT adds, “And the four had their faces and their wings thus: Their wings touched one another.” Far from clearing up a difficulty in the shorter text, it is difficult to imagine where a scribe who had only the shorter text would have gotten the idea that the wings touched each other, or indeed why he would have added a reference to wings at all, since 1:9b goes on to refer only to the creatures’ faces.

(3) 1:14: This verse, which appears only in MT, reads, “And the living creatures ran here and there like a flash of lightning.” Nothing in the short reading is explained by this addition. Moreover, nothing in the short reading suggests that the living creatures were running “here and there” at any point during the theophany, nor that their motion was lightning-like.

(4) 1:24: Both MT and LXX describe the sound of the living creatures’ wings as “like the sound of many waters.” There is nothing obviously difficult or inadequate about this as a description. But MT goes on to add “like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound, a noise, like the sound of an army.” Since the short reading already describes the phenomena involved, it is much easier to imagine the original author, excited by his mental picture of the vision he was trying to describe, adding more description of a feature that stood out in his mind than to imagine a scribe heaping up additional similes for one detail of a phenomenon that was no more than an historical account to him (albeit an account of a manifestation of God in history).

(5) 1:27: The same could be said of the long reading here, where after the words “and I saw (something) like the appearance of polished brass” MT adds “like the likeness of fire within (an enclosure) for it round about.” If anything, the long reading needs editorial explanation. Far from clearing up a difficulty, it is easily the most difficult part of the verse in terms of syntax and of content. It is difficult to imagine any scribe considering it a clarification of the text.

(6) 2:2: MT reads, “And the Spirit came upon me, *when he spoke to me*, and set me on my feet.” LXX omits the italicized phrase but has the additional words “and took me up and raised me” after “spoke to me.” In both these instances, the sentence is clear without the added words. They are almost redundant, and it is not apparent why a scribe would have felt they added anything to the text unless they were already present in his exemplar.

We have, then, six instances of long readings (half the total number of long readings in our pericope) where, on the assumption that the short reading is original, no plausible reason is apparent for the creation of the long one. Can the origin of the short readings be explained on the assumption that it is the long readings that are original?

Griesbach himself supplied the key to an affirmative answer:¹³

But on the other hand the longer reading is to be preferred to the shorter . . . if that which is lacking could be lacking without harming the sense of the structure of the sentence, as for example incidental, brief propositions, and other matter the absence of which would be scarcely noticed by the scribe when re-reading what he had written.

¹³In Metzger, *Text* 120.

This qualification to the canon of preference for the shorter reading is not ordinarily repeated in modern text-critical literature such as that cited above. But a consideration of the circumstances in which the pericope we have just examined was copied by hand over a period of centuries, from unwieldy scrolls and without the benefit of aids such as eyeglasses or electric lights, justifies the suggestion that such haplography (in the broad sense of that term¹⁴) could have occurred easily. In every one of our six cases the text still rereads with perfect sense after the deletion of the long readings. We see, then, that while the long readings in question cannot be plausibly explained as secondary developments from the short readings, the latter can be plausibly explained as haplographies of the former. We should then conclude that in these six cases the long readings are probably original.

These findings do not support the view that the shorter reading should be preferred, as such, over the longer. Rather, they suggest that the textual critic should take the possibility of haplography with equal seriousness.

¹⁴Klein, *Textual Criticism* 77.