Background

- Prior to the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century, all texts had to be hand-copied by scribes and copyists. These men and women came from diverse backgrounds and training: some of them were well-educated and trained to copy texts, while many others were not. In fact, some of them may have even been illiterate.
- Because of this, changes were easily introduced into copies of texts, both intentionally and unintentionally. This was true also of New Testament texts.
- In some New Testament manuscripts, the frequency of these textual changes indicates a broader tendency, usually reflective of a cultural perspective or bias.

Case Study

- One fifth-century manuscript known as Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis frequently downplays the significance and prominence of women mentioned in the text.
- This apparent anti-feminist tendency can perhaps best be seen in Codex Bezae’s Greek text of Acts chapter seventeen, which traces the missionary journey of Paul and Silas through southern Turkey, Lebanon, and southern Egypt.
- Aside from knowing that it was most likely created in the late fourth or early fifth century C.E., scholars know very little about Codex Bezae, including its place of composition and author(s).
- Among the enormous number of locations of its origin suggested by scholars, some of the more plausible provenances include southern Turkey, Lebanon, and southern Egypt.
- Since it is a bilingual manuscript, containing biblical texts in both Latin and Greek, the copyist was familiar with both scripts, although numerous grammatical and syntactical errors reveal that the skill in both languages was minimal. Additionally, Codex Bezae contains a number of readings that deviate from the standard versions of the canonical text.

Examples

- Acts xvii.4
  - The standard reading of the text is translated as:
    And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.¹
  - Codex Bezae’s reading of the text is translated as:
    And some out of them believed and joined with Paul and Silas in the teaching, many of the God-fearers and a large multitude of Greeks and not a few wives of the leaders.²

  Codex Bezae’s variant reading in Acts xvii.4: wives of the leaders.

- The change from “leading women” to “wives of the leaders” is striking. This change downplays the prominence of the women mentioned in this verse and reduces the importance of the leading women to mere wives of the leading men.

- Acts xvii.34
  - The standard reading of the text is translated as:
    But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.
  - Codex Bezae’s reading of the text is translated as:
    But certain men joined. They believed him, among whom were both Dionysius, a certain Areopagite of high standing, and others with them.

  The female name Damaris is omitted in the Bezan text, while the name of the male member of the Athenian Areopagus remains. Such modifications to the manuscript tradition have potentially significant, interpretive ramifications.

Conclusion

- The subtle but striking alterations within Codex Bezae suggest an anti-feminist perspective. By the time of the codex’s manufacture, the universal church had largely displaced women from its leadership positions and had adopted a patriarchal perspective from preexistent and persistent Roman cultural attitudes toward women.

References

¹ Taken from the New American Standard Bible translation.
² Taken from an English translation of Acts xvii of Codex Bezae by Dr. Amy S. Anderson, Professor of Greek and New Testament at North Central University.

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