

The Greek Orthodox Lectionary and the New Testament: History, Text, and Traditions

Paul Anderson

It often comes as a surprise to many Christians to learn that the Greek Orthodox liturgical tradition, from its inception, has never used the single bound book most people know as the Bible—at least not in the sense that it is usually conceived in the West. There are many liturgical books in use regularly in the Greek Orthodox Church (GOC), of which two remain preeminent: the *Euaggelion*, or Gospel book, and the *Apostolos*, or Epistle book. The fact that there has been no complete, bound “Bible” in the GOC is due largely to the fact that the liturgical tradition governed by the Greek lectionary embodies a long extant tradition that has been copied and distributed for millennia among its faithful. However, there is in use today an official New Testament of the GOC, known as the Ecumenical Patriarchal edition of the Greek New Testament (hereafter, Antoniades GNT). This paper will offer a cursory look at the relationship between the Antoniades GNT and Greek Gospel lectionary.

The history and use of the Greek lectionary has for the most part been ignored in western textual scholarship, let alone the Antoniades GNT, and is seldom discussed within the Eastern Orthodox tradition itself. In this paper I will briefly discuss both, covering three main aspects: 1) their respective manuscript backgrounds; 2) their historical trajectories; and, 3) their respective statuses today, including plans for a new critical edition of the Greek Gospel lectionary by the Center for Study and Preservation of the Majority Text (CSPMT).¹

The manuscript evidence behind the Gospel lectionary text of the GOC is somewhat complex. In western textual criticism, discussions regarding the lectionary manuscripts have largely taken a back seat to the quest for the “original text” of the NT. Western scholars theorize that lectionary manuscripts do not contain sufficient older, valuable readings to justify further investigations into the lectionary manuscript tradition. Members of the CSPMT certainly do not ascribe to this viewpoint. This past year, we have diligently researched the bulk of Greek Gospel lectionary manuscripts and categorized them into as many as four main groups. These Byzantine lectionary manuscripts contain valuable and viable readings that may be traced back to the Apostolic Greek NT.

The extant manuscript tradition of the Greek lectionary begins in or around the fourth century. This does not preclude their earlier usage however, due to the process of exemplar copying which possibly led to their exemplars’ disappearance. The oldest extant date from the fourth and fifth centuries, but we also have the writings of earlier Church Fathers, which to some extent push some texts of the Greek lectionaries back even further.

The organization of the manuscripts into book (codex) form assumed more or less a four-stage development as communities settled and utilized their manuscripts for liturgical purposes within the Church. The first historical stage consisted of lectionary manuscripts

¹ *The Center for Study and Preservation of the Majority Text (CSPMT)* is an organization dedicated to scholarly study, research and preservation of Byzantine Greek New Testament manuscripts. Their website is available at www.cspmt.org.

containing pericopae lections as select readings utilized mainly primarily for Saturday-Sunday (*sabbatou-kyriakou*) readings, the earliest of this type being transmitted in the so-called Jerusalem Order, as found in some Greek and ancient Armenian manuscripts. In time, as the liturgy developed and churches spread throughout the Byzantine Empire, additional pericopae were added to the lectionary within the manuscripts to accommodate more frequent usage. Daily readings through Pentecost began by the late eighth century. This form of lectionary manuscript is known as “lesk,” or *ebdomades sabbatou-kyriakou*. Greek uncial script (capital letters) was still largely being utilized at this time. Gradual transitioning of the script to the use of miniscules (lower case letters) occurred by the ninth century, as lectionary development in the scriptoria progressed in response to the need for more efficient manuscript production. At this time, full weekly Gospel pericopae were added to liturgical manuscripts as churches expanded the number of daily service readings throughout the week rather than simply on Saturday and Sunday.

The final stages of the manuscript lectionary culminated with the daily or yearly form lectionary manuscripts, with daily pericopae for the entire week throughout the ecclesiastical calendar year. In addition, as the liturgy of the GOC became more settled and regionalized, the various readings for the *Menologion* or “civil calendar,” which begins in September, was also added near the end of most manuscripts. The pericopae selections varied somewhat by locale, depending on the saints being honored, but for the most part the readings were shared among manuscripts. Production of lectionary manuscripts was not limited to, but included such the well-known monastic scriptoria located at Constantinople, Mt. Athos, Mt. Sinai-St. Catherine’s, Meteora and others. With the fall of the Byzantine Empire, lectionary manuscript production became centered in other outlying Orthodox strongholds such as Wallachia and Myra, under the direction of scribal priests like Luke the Cypriot (Wallachia) and Matthew of Myra.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, Greek settlement in Venice had resulted in the establishment of well-known Greek printing houses, such as the one established by the famous Greek printer Aldus Manutius. Other Greek Venetian printing houses soon began publishing Greek liturgical and NT editions. In 1539, Stefano da Sabio published the *editio princeps* of the Gospel lectionary in Venice. Other well-known Venetian Greek printing houses, such as those of N. Glykys and N. Saros, dominated the printing of liturgical texts, including the Greek *Euaggelion* lectionary, for over 150 years. Scribal manuscript production began to diminish with the advent of the printing press, displacing most of the production in the monasteries. The printing press allowed for easier and quicker production of these liturgical texts for the Greek Orthodox diaspora.

By the 1700’s, critical editions of the GNT in the West began to be published. Later in 1881, the W-H Greek critical text was published in England, without much interest in the lectionary manuscripts or editions. This was also the case for the German-based Nestle-Aland critical editions, which began in the early 1900s. Up to this time, no comparable Greek NT had been produced in the East. During the same period, textual studies of the Greek NT had undergone a revolution with the discovery of a few very early manuscripts, which dominated interest in the field of textual criticism for many years. In lieu of this situation, Professor Basileos Antoniades, of the Halki School of Theology, was commissioned to produce a new Greek NT edition, a project that was sanctioned by Patriarch Constantine V of Constantinople. Antoniades and his assistants collated over one hundred lectionary manuscripts from various locales throughout the Eastern repositories. As a result, in 1904,

the Ecumenical Patriarchal GNT was published with an introduction and forward by Antoniadès.

This edition was met with criticism in the West for its alleged lack of attention to critical methodologies and introduction of grammatical irregularities in the text. Western scholars also asserted that its apparatus was rather useless and based upon Antoniadès' personal justification for the readings he adopted. Antoniadès himself admitted the experimental nature of the edition, but observed that the Greek NT was not simply a book like any other to be questioned, but was rather a preserved holy book, unlike any other. Its role within the Church had continued unaltered for millennia. At any rate, the final revision, in 1912, gave the GOC its first official GNT text. Perhaps western textual critics should have more carefully reviewed his introduction prior to their rush to judgment regarding the text and underlying manuscripts utilized for the edition. Antoniadès' extraordinary knowledge of the lectionary manuscript tradition continues to be largely underestimated.

The text of the Greek lectionary remained relatively stable with no significant changes since the time of the first Venetian editions. However, this changed somewhat over time when the Patriarchal Synod initiated a plan to bring the lectionary in greater conformity with the Antoniadès GNT. It soon became apparent that a more encompassing revision of the Gospel lectionary would be necessary. With the foundation of the Apostoliki Diakonia (AD) Press in 1936, the prospects of a lectionary revision was undertaken, which would take place over subsequent decades. By 1968, AD Press had introduced many significant textual revisions into the lectionary text in order to bring it into greater conformity with Antoniadès GNT. In 1986, under the guidance of Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, the final revision was made by Demetrius Tzerpos and the AD Press. Since that time, the *Euaggelion* and *Apostolos* lectionary texts have remained unchanged.

CSPMT and a New Critical Greek Lectionary Edition

Today one can find on the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese website (www.goarch.org) the texts of both the Antoniadès GNT² and the *Euaggelion*.³ Viewers can see that they still differ to a small degree and the places they differ are quite interesting. To be sure, the latter is a liturgical book. But it is not just any book; it is revered as the preserved Word of God, which also calls for further study as well.

In the near future, the CSPMT is planning to produce a new critical Greek Gospel lectionary edition with an extensive critical apparatus for comprehensive manuscript and lectionary edition comparison. Today, CSPMT is conducting groundbreaking lectionary textual studies and collations for the purpose of producing these new critical editions, which it is hoped will spur new interest among western scholars and give the GOC its first critical text lectionary edition of the twenty-first century.

The lectionary edition of CSPMT will respect the sanctity of this ancient Gospel book while providing interested scholars an edition for research and further study of its sacred text. The inclusion of the Antoniadès GNT text in the apparatus will allow for easy comparison and study, allowing readers to see how the texts developed over time. Several lectionary manuscript groupings and different lectionary editions, as well as continuous text variations, will be included in the apparatus.

² <http://onlinechapel.goarch.org/biblegreek/>

³ http://www.goarch.org/resources/monthly_readings; <http://www.goarch.org/chapel/>

In conclusion, the Antoniades Ecumenical Patriarchal Greek New Testament and GOC Gospel lectionary manuscript tradition have an interesting and interconnected history, which for the most part remains untapped. It is hoped that more interest will soon be directed towards these sacred books of the GOC. In its appreciation for those attending this presentation and for the advancement of Greek lectionary studies, CSPMT is today releasing the first textual collation comparing the Antoniades GNT and the current AD Press Gospel lectionary edition, which will also be made available on our website immediately following this conference.