

## WSWG 28

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Campus Center, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

### *Stylometrics and the Question of Interpolation in Paul*



#### *Concerning Text Growth*

By the custodians of ancient texts, interpolations are usually regarded as evil – corruptions introduced by copyists and other vile persons; the very concept is an affront. This is a natural reaction, but not a realistic one. It ignores one of two phases in the formation of many texts. There is indeed a corruption phase, beginning when a text is handed over to copyists to be multiplied for wider circulation. That beginning we may call Point P, the event which inaugurates the text’s public period. Before that, in many cases, there lies a formation process, during which the text is still under authorial (or proprietary) control, and may be adjusted or expanded to take account of the responses or needs of the limited audience to which it is then exposed – in Vergil’s case, the Roman literary circle; for Mark or Luke, the home church.

Authority texts are especially liable to such evolution. The Gortyn Law Code, the only completely preserved laws of any Greek city, was cut in stone on the walls of the hearing chamber. Analysis shows a group of laws logically arranged by topic, followed by an addendum with further points and modifications of the original ones, followed by a second addendum of similar nature. The implication is that an original code was twice extended to agree with later legal decisions or enactments. The second addendum was engraved on the stone wall by a different hand than the one which did the preceding portions. The fact that the text *was literally set in stone* did not prevent its being adjusted to the needs of justice in Gortyn. At every stage in its evolution, the code was in the possession and under the control of the state. The third section is not an example of scribal graffiti.

That Mark’s account of the expected Last Days underwent just this sort of repeated update is clearly shown by the analysis of Taylor (p636-644). It is evident that ideas about the details of the Last Days varied throughout the first century. The text of Mark, again under the control of its proprietor, and in the interest of accuracy for its first audience, turns out to be witness to several stages in the evolution of those ideas – during its formation phase. The entire growth process occurs within the authorial period, and predates the manuscript tradition.

It is often urged that interpolation proposals bear “the burden of proof,” and are not to be accepted unless all other explanations fail. Given the hermeneutical ingenuity built up over two millennia, that moment never comes. In any case, the word “proof” applies only in deductive subjects like Euclidean geometry. In humanistic fields, as in astrophysics, all findings are provisional. The best finding is the one which best explains the available evidence. The interruptive or otherwise discontinuous nature of some passage is presumptive evidence of its interpolation. That evidence must be weighed along with any other, but it cannot properly be ruled out of court ahead of time.

If we are to reach a responsible verdict, the case must first be heard.