

NEW VARIANT READING OF JOHN 1:34

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The Greek text of John 1:34 has long puzzled scholars because of a difficult textual variant. Did the original text read so that Jesus is called “the Son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ)¹ or that he is called “the Chosen One of God” (ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ).² Textual witnesses have supported both variants, with the former reading having the support of the vast majority of witnesses. A recent discovery regarding the well-known papyrus P⁷⁵ changes this picture.

Marie-Luise Lakmann³ notes that the scribe of P⁷⁵ originally wrote ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἐκλεκτός,⁴ then erased ὁ ἐκλεκτός and wrote τοῦ θεοῦ instead. The letters τος are still visible and there are traces of the erased letters despite some lacunae. The textual variants with their supporting witnesses for John 1:34 can now be written follows:⁵

¹E.g., Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 172.

²E.g., Gordon D. Fee, “Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, SD 45 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3-16.

³Marie-Luise Lakmann, private conversations with author, January 18 and 26, 2005. Lakmann works at the Institute für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, Münster, Germany.

⁴See “New Testament Transcripts Prototype” for P⁷⁵ of John 1:34 at <<http://nttranscripts.uni-muenster.de>>. Lakmann is also of the opinion that the scribe did not intend to write ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ, because there is lacuna before the next words. The lacuna serves as a paragraph marker. In her estimate, such feature would be strange if the scribe intended to write reading (4). She concludes that it is more likely that the scribe stopped after writing ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἐκλεκτός τῆ ἐπαύριον, then erased ὁ ἐκλεκτός, wrote τοῦ θεοῦ instead, and continued the next sentence after τῆ ἐπαύριον.

⁵P⁵ is not considered here because it contains lacunae; it has only the final ς visible and consequently this witness is debated. Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, eds., exhibit the reading ὁ ἐκλεκτός (*The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: New and Complete Transcriptions with Photographs* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001], 75). They are supported by Metzger, 172. On the other hand, J. K. Elliott opts for ὁ υἱός (“Five New Papyri of the New Testament,” *NovT* 41 [1999]: 209-213). Reuben J. Swanson, ed., refrains from making a choice and lists a blank. (*New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines Against Codex Vaticanus*, vol. 4, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 13). NA27 (8th reprint) does not list P⁵ as supporting ὁ ἐκλεκτός, as was done earlier. It is probably safe not to assume P⁵ as a witness for either reading.

(1) ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ	ϩ ^{66, 75c} \aleph^{c2} A B C L W ^{sup} \aleph it ^{aur} , c, f, l, g vg syr ^{pal-mss} a/
(2) ὁ ἐκλεκτὸς τοῦ θεοῦ	ϩ ¹⁰⁶ \aleph^* it ^b , e, ff2* syr ^{c, s}
(3) ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἐκλεκτός	ϩ ⁷⁵
(4) ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἐκλεκτὸς τοῦ θεοῦ	it ^a , ff2c, vg ^{mss} syr ^{pal-mss} cop ^{sa}

Which of these possibilities, if any, is the most likely reading of the autograph? I would like to suggest that the uncorrected \aleph^{75} reading may be the original one and may explain other witnesses. Consequently, John 1:34 should read “the Chosen Son.” This is an intriguing reading, as it seems to combine Isaiah’s motif of the chosen servant (Isa 42:1) and the Psalmist’s motif of the messianic Son (Ps 2). These concepts fit nicely with the “Word became flesh” theology of the Gospel of John.

Granted, the \aleph^{75} variant is a singular reading, but it has roots deep in the second-century, especially if \aleph^{75} is a late second century witness.⁶ Bart D. Ehrman has shown that orthodox scribes occasionally altered the text to defend the orthodox theology and what they thought the text meant, because some readings were prone to be misunderstood and used by the heretics.⁷ If early controversies over Adoptionism compelled the scribes to suppress the reading ὁ ἐκλεκτός, it is possible that the alteration was made so early in the second century that the original reading was eventually limited to a relatively small number of witnesses. Since John does not use ὁ ἐκλεκτός anywhere else, it is difficult to explain why a scribe would change ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ to ὁ ἐκλεκτός, but theological reasons such as the above can explain the opposite. For this reason reading (1) should be abandoned, even though it is printed as original in NA²⁷ / UBS⁴. Reading (4) is probably a conflation of readings (1) and (2). This would support the assertion that the original text had ὁ ἐκλεκτός.

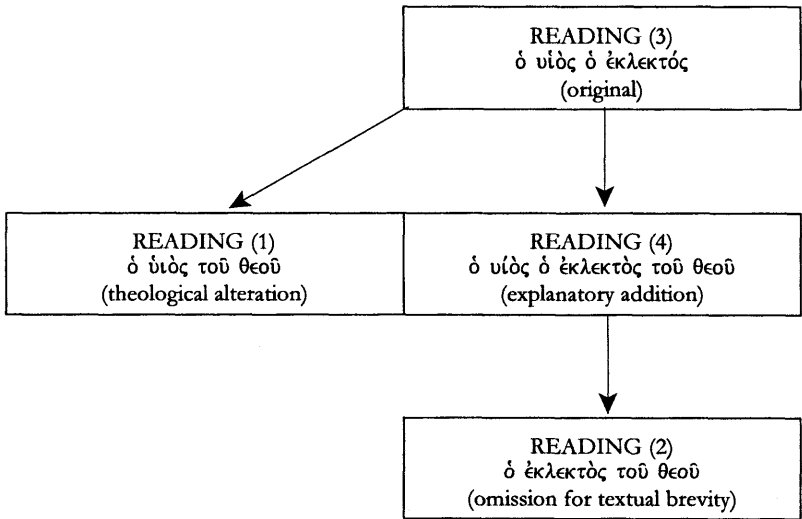
It is difficult to decide between readings (2) and (3), but the abruptness of reading (3) compels this researcher to consider it a more likely choice. It lacks τοῦ θεοῦ, which serves as an explanation about whose chosen son/one is in view. For this reason, I consider readings (2) and (4) secondary. The abruptness of the reading (3) may explain why the scribe of \aleph^{75} corrected the reading to a more familiar ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, especially if he was also worried about Adoptionist misconstructions.

I propose the following hypothesis. Reading (3) is the original from which reading (4) derives by a scribal explanatory addition of τοῦ θεοῦ. Reading (1) in all probability altered ὁ ἐκλεκτός based on theological reasons. It also became the dominant reading because of its clear orthodoxy. Reading (2) has

⁶See Comfort with Barrett, 501.

⁷Bart D. Ehrman *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

an omission of ὁ υἱός for textual brevity.⁸ If this scenario is permitted, reading (3) stands as original. See the diagram below. In my view, this important textual variant needs to be included in critical apparatuses and the text of John 1:34 be reconsidered.⁹



⁸See, e.g., James R. Royse, "Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, SD 46 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239-252.

⁹For a comprehensive examination of this new variant and its impact on John 1:34, see Timo Flink, "Son and Chosen: A Text-Critical Study of John 1:34," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 18 (2005): 87-111.