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Gathering Data: A Demographic Analysis of the New Testament

Initially, mine was a research project with a goal of gathering data and seeing what that data could be used to say, rather than with doing research to answer a specific question. In previous research I had undertaken for various classes, I had noticed a distinct lack in available statistics regarding issues of gender in the Bible, and, in taking a class called “Computational Methods in the Humanities” with Dr. David J. Birnbaum, I saw a way to obtain those statistics. So, with Dr. Birnbaum as my mentor, I decided to focus my efforts on the New Testament rather than the entire Bible, and to expand my focus from just gender to being a more overarching demographic survey. Thus my summer research project consisted of doing XML markup on the majority of the New Testament, getting better acquainted with the programming language XSLT to gather statistics from that markup, and then attempting to research Christian positions on demographic issues using my data in some way.

The initial and most time-consuming step in my project was to insert markup in my texts using XML. The texts I chose were not quite the entire New Testament, but rather the four gospels, the book of Acts, and the twelve epistles traditionally credited as Paul’s writing. I made this selection because Jesus and Paul are arguably the most influential forces in the formation of the Christian religion, such that a dataset allowing for comparison between them could be widely useful. Because I was looking at demographic issues, I decided to create markup that would allow me to analyze the distribution of all the players in these books along the lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. I also kept track of age and physical ability because it was not difficult to add these and I felt that having as much data as possible would be a positive thing in case these demographic factors proved relevant. Thus I created a header for each book which consisted of a list of all the characters who were mentioned in any way in the book along with their age, ability, class, ethnicity, and gender. Then, within the text, I marked every reference to a character, subdivided as when he or she was named, was described, acted, spoke, or was spoken to. In this way, I was able to create a table of characters listing not only the demographic information for each one but also the number of times he or she spoke, acted, was spoken to, was named, and was described. Additionally, I marked every instance in which instructions were given specifically to people of certain groups, such as instructions for women, or when there were teachings about certain groups, for instance when Paul writes about the way that gentiles are now part of the covenant that was formerly open only to Jews.

The next step was to write XSLT stylesheets. The first one I made connected the references that I had marked up inside the text to the header, and then connected the documents to one another, so that if a character appeared in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he would only appear in the master list of characters once and would have his total number of references be the sum of the totals from all three books. Next, I made a stylesheet to count the number of speeches, actions, etc. done by all female characters, Jewish characters, etc. This gave me a chart with data along the lines of “only 43% of the characters are Jewish, but 83% of the speeches made in these books are made by Jews.” My final stylesheet was intended to gather all of the instructions and descriptions I had marked as being demographically specific into one document, divided by who they were addressed to or were about, so that I could look at how many were addressed to different groups.

While these tables I have just described are not exactly results per say, in that they do not say anything in and of themselves, their creation was my primary goal in setting out on this project. They contain a vast amount of information from which could be drawn a multitude of different types of conclusions, so the primary product of my summer project has been the creation of a website that has the tables I just described on it so that someone researching the twelve apostles, for instance, could make points like “Peter spoke 82 times while John only spoke 18 times” and draw whatever conclusion they saw from that. There is a table containing all the characters which can be sorted according to whichever aspect of identity or type of reference a visitor desires, and there are tables with both numbers and percentages for all the types of references I counted for each class, ethnicity, and gender I looked at. Additionally, the documents I inserted markup into and the XSLT stylesheets I created are all stored on a website called GitHub, an open-source software management site. I started my project with a copy of the Bible I found on GitHub that already had chapters and verses marked which saved me a lot of time; likewise, if another digital humanities researcher wanted to look at speeches in the New Testament for something other than who said them, he or she could access my documents that already had them located and just add their own markup for what they were looking for.

While my purpose was resource creation, I did have a specific topic in mind that I wanted to apply my data to as part of my project; unfortunately, the data did not actually serve that topic as I had hoped. Initially, I set out to compare what Paul said about certain groups of people as well as the demographics of the people he directly mentions to what Jesus said about certain groups of people as well as the demographics of the people he directly interacts with. However, all except for one of the instructions I marked as being about or to a certain group was in Paul’s writing, and many of the characters mentioned in the epistles are mentioned only once and do not have a known class or ethnicity, and occasionally not even a known gender. Therefore I would have to compare instructions in the case of Paul to characters in the case of Jesus, which is not a comparison it is possible to make. Instead, the way I chose to use my data for my own project was to take the instructions I gathered and use them to compare and contrast the two largest protestant denominations in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, with one another. I first read the official commentary by both denominations on each of the passages and then researched their positions on the issues of gender, ethnicity, and class as officially stated on their websites. These findings are on my website along with my data. The area in which the differences proved most interesting was, as I expected, gender.

On this issue, the contrast between the UMC and SBC is sharp, and the words on their websites can be easily predicted from the explanations in their commentaries. For all of the passages in the epistles providing instructions for the way women ought to behave both in church and at home, the UMC commentary explains the cultural context in which such instructions made sense while the SBC commentary defends them as being compatible with contemporary western culture. For example, 1 Timothy 1:11-12 forbids women from teaching and commands them to remain silent in church. From the UMC commentary a reader gathers that the churches Paul was writing to met in houses, meaning the ordinary household order of the day (men holding authority over women) had to maintained within the church to avoid confusion; furthermore, the early church had to be supportive of the ordinary household order because to do otherwise was to discourage converts and to draw persecution from both Roman and Jewish authorities (Dunn 800-802). The SBC commentary does not refute any part of that cultural context, but it adds that even today, if women had authority positions in the church, they would be too busy to devote sufficient energy to raising their children, thus carrying forward the idea of proper household order to the present instead of leaving in the past, as American culture has and as the UMC advocates (Lea 94-105).

Extrapolating these sorts of interpretations into viewpoints, it would be reasonable to posit that the UMC website would regard gender in a way that makes the church palatable to modern western culture in a similar way that Paul did to his culture, and that the SBC would ask modern church members to follow the rules found in such passages. Indeed, this is what one finds. From the UMC website: “We therefore urge that every effort be made to eliminate sex-role stereotypes in activity and portrayal of family life and in all aspects of voluntary and compensatory participation in the Church and society (*People*).” From the SBC website: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture (*Southern*).”

This is just an example of the way I was able to use my data draw conclusions about these two denominations, and doing so was in turn just an example of the many ways that the statistics on New Testament demographics I derived this summer using Digital Humanities technology could be used to support statements about Christianity as a religion. Moving forward, I do not have any concrete plans to continue this research, although I think it would be very useful to be able to markup the rest of the New Testament as well as the entirety of the Old Testament and then use the XSLT stylesheets I’ve already created to make the charts comprehensive; however, I do not have the time to undertake that at present. I do intend to submit a paper on the research I did on the SBC and the UMC using my data to Forbes and Fifth, and I hope that my data as presented on the website I created and my code as stored on GitHub will be useful to future researchers and that my work this summer will have contributed to the growing body of open source material in the digital humanities.

Works Cited

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