

The Text of the New Testament

The Need for Textual Criticism

Before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century all copies of the New Testament had to be written by hand. Each act of copying provided an occasion for minor alterations to be introduced into the text of Scripture, whether by pure error or by deliberate amendment of the text. Some scribes were simply careless in their copying, misreading a word or even omitting several words. Some scribes evidently wrote at the dictation of another, perhaps several scribes writing simultaneously at the dictation of one reader: there is evidence in the manuscripts of errors having crept in through faulty hearing. But there is also evidence of deliberate alterations to the text of Scripture. Sometimes a scribe sought to clarify what was written by altering or adding a word or two. Sometimes he would change the names of persons or of places to conform to his own knowledge of history or of geography. Sometimes he would alter the sense of a passage in order that it might reflect his own understanding of Christian doctrine.¹ No doubt such deliberate alterations were performed in a spirit of piety and in the genuine belief that they restored the true meaning (if not the original wording) of the text of Scripture.

Even the oldest of New Testament manuscripts which have been preserved for us are removed from the original writing of the Apostles and their circle by more than 100 years. They are therefore several copies removed from the original manuscripts, commonly called the 'autographs'. The great majority of the New Testament manuscripts are removed from the time of the Apostles by several hundred years. No two manuscripts give exactly the same reading in every verse and word of Scripture. Yet our knowledge of the original text of the New Testament can only be abstracted from our knowledge of these various manuscripts. It is the function of New Testament textual criticism to gain an intelligent understanding of the various manuscripts and their mutual relationships and thereby to arrive at a reasoned judgement concerning the most likely form of the original text.

The Early Transmission of the New Testament Text

To understand textual criticism one needs to appreciate something of the transmission of the New Testament text, something of the way in which it has been handed down to us. In the earliest days of the Christian church, each of the individual books of the New Testament would have circulated separately. The great demand for copies of the Epistles and Gospels led to the rapid production and circulation of copies. It was not very long before the various writings began to be collected together, first the Pauline Epistles, then the Gospels and Acts, the Catholic Epistles, and last of all the book of Revelation.

In the first century or so of the Christian church, the rapid expansion of the church and consequent multiplication of manuscripts went on with little central ecclesiastical oversight or control. The quality of the copies produced in this period was not always good and the consequent number of variant readings generated was rather high. It has been argued that the vast majority of the variant readings witnessed in the various New Testament manuscripts have their origin in the first two centuries.² It was only as the church began to create its own scribal schools for the manufacture of New Testament manuscripts that the copying was performed more carefully and checked more thoroughly. Old manuscripts were 'corrected' to bring them into line with what had become the generally accepted text. Newly produced manuscripts consequently differed from one another to a decreasing extent.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the relationship between the various New Testament manuscripts is what is known as 'textual families'. A detailed examination of the various manuscripts which have come down to us reveals that there are groups of manuscripts which seem to be related in some way; they share the same distinctive readings in a number of places. These families of manuscripts seem to

¹For examples of such alterations to the text, see, for instance, Bruce M Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1968), pp. 186-206.

²E.C.Colwell, "The Origins of Texttypes of New Testament Manuscripts", *Early Christian Origins* (ed. A.Wilkgren: Chicago, 1961), pp.128-138. See particularly p.138.

be associated with certain geographical areas and have therefore been given geographical titles such as the Western Text, the Alexandrian Text, the Caesarean Text and the Byzantine Text.

At the simplest possible level there are two contrary explanations for the origin of these textual families. On the one hand, it could be argued that the various manuscripts which seem to be related are all descendants of the same archetype. The various descendants of this master copy all reflect something of the peculiarities of the archetype although they each individually differ from it because of the variations which were introduced in the production of the descendants. The local families of text reflect the fact that the various manuscripts in a certain area were all descended from a master copy possessed (perhaps) by one of the largest churches in the area.

On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the family relationships are evidence not of a common ancestor, but of an increasing tendency towards a standardisation of the text. In each geographical area certain readings would be officially, or popularly, recognised as the accepted form of the New Testament text. Any new manuscript being produced would be conformed to the commonly accepted reading even though the manuscript from which it was being copied read differently. This activity would have been viewed as restoring the text to its proper form.

Both of the above views undoubtedly reflect something of the truth. The loosely related manuscripts which make up the textual families are undoubtedly the result of these two processes going on simultaneously, though within each textual family the one process may have dominated at one particular time while the opposite processes dominated at another.

The Chief Witnesses to the New Testament Text

By this time it may sound as if the original text of the New Testament has become irretrievably lost. For a more balanced perspective we need only review the many witnesses to the New Testament text and to comment on the extent of their agreement.

The various witnesses to the New Testament text may be divided into three categories. The first and most important of these is that of the various Greek manuscripts. There are approximately 5,000 Greek manuscripts still in existence containing all or part of the New Testament. These are divided into four groups according to the material on which they were written, the type of script in which they were written, or the use for which the manuscripts were made. The most ancient group is that of the papyri, of which there are at present 81. Some of these date back to the end of the second century. They all contain only part of the new Testament and some are fragments containing only a few verses. The second group are called Uncials after the form of square script in which they were written. This form of script was progressively phased out from the ninth to twelfth centuries, being replaced by 'Minuscule' script. There are 266 Uncial manuscripts and 2,754 Minuscule. The last group of manuscripts comprises the lectionaries (in both Uncial and Minuscule script), of which there are 2,135.³

The great majority of Greek manuscripts belong to one textual family, the Byzantine text. This is hardly surprising, for the majority of Greek manuscripts were produced and preserved within the Greek speaking Eastern church of which the Byzantine text became the standard version of the New Testament. The Byzantine text is therefore sometimes referred to as the 'majority text'.

The second important group of witnesses to the New Testament text are the ancient versions or translations. In the early years of the Christian church the New Testament writings were translated into many languages; Syriac, Latin, Coptic etc. Ancient manuscripts in these languages give us a fair indication of the Greek text used by the translator.

The third class of witnesses to the New Testament text consists of quotations from the New Testament which are to be found in the works of various church Fathers. These also bear witness to the character of the New Testament text being quoted, even though the history of the transmission of the writings of these Fathers adds its own complications.

³These statistics are taken from Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp.32,33.

The first thing that needs to be noted from this catalogue of witnesses is that, in the providence of God, we have access to a remarkable number of manuscripts of the New Testament. The New Testament is the better preserved than any other document of its age, for as Bruce Metzger remarks, "Homer's *Iliad*, for example, the 'Bible' of the ancient Greeks, is preserved in 457 papyri [fragments], 2 uncial manuscripts and 188 minuscule manuscripts."⁴

Secondly, we must note that the text has not only been preserved by means of a remarkable quantity of manuscripts, it has also been preserved in remarkably fine quality. The various manuscripts agree to a remarkable extent. Of the variations which do exist, the vast majority are concerned with trivial matters such as spelling, word order and the like. Of the remaining variants, the majority can be sorted out quite simply by comparing manuscript with manuscript. There are, of course, a few very difficult judgements concerning the original reading of the text in one place or another, but these few only serve to highlight the remarkable way in which the text of the New Testament has been preserved. We need therefore to keep the discipline of Textual Criticism in a proper perspective. We should not become so conscious of the minor variations in the text that we lose sight of the remarkable degree to which the manuscripts are in word for word agreement. Any survey of the manuscript evidence, far from suggesting that the original New Testament is lost and gone for ever, only confirms us in the confidence that a critically compiled Greek Testament differs very little indeed from the actual words which God caused to be written at the hands of the Evangelists and Apostles.

The Practice of Textual Criticism Yesterday and Today

The history of Textual Criticism can broadly be divided into three periods; the pre-critical period, the classical period, and the modern period.

The pre-critical period stretches roughly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century (though textual study predates even this period). The Renaissance had earlier brought to the Western Church a renewed interest in Greek literature, including the Greek New Testament. Before this time the Western Church knew only the Latin Vulgate. With the invention of the printing press (more properly, moveable type) in the fifteenth century, the way was opened up for the distribution of the New Testament in Greek. In 1516 Erasmus published the first printed copy of the complete Greek Testament. Erasmus compiled his printed version using only a few Greek manuscripts, all of which were from the later Byzantine family although he did supplement these manuscripts by occasionally translating back from the Latin Vulgate.

Erasmus's Greek text was later edited and published by Stephanus, and later still by Elzevir. The 'Authorised Version', in the New Testament, largely follows Stephanus's third edition of 1550. The second edition of Elzevir boasts in its introduction that this is the Greek text which is now "received by all". The Erasmus/Stephanus/Elzevir text, the text which lies behind the Authorised Version, has therefore become known as the *Textus Receptus* or Received Text.

The classical period of criticism really began with the recognition in the eighteenth century that there were manuscript traditions which were recognisably different from the Received Text (though again, this recognition was not entirely new). It culminated in the overthrow of the dominance of the Received Text in favour of the textual theories of Westcott and Hort.

Classical criticism was dominated by the study of the genealogical relationships between the various New Testament manuscripts. It was this research which recognised and labelled the various textual families. It was then argued that the number of manuscripts containing a particular reading was of no significance in measuring the degree of authenticity of that reading. Many hundreds of manuscripts might contain one peculiar reading simply because they were all descendants of one ancestor which itself contained that reading, while a parallel manuscript with a more accurate reading might have only a handful of surviving descendants.

To cut a long story short, Westcott and Hort argued that the whole of the Byzantine family of texts (that is, the majority of the Greek manuscripts), are descendants of a relatively late text created by

⁴Ibid. p.34

compilation from a number of other manuscripts at the end of the third century. They argued that the Byzantine text, the text behind the Authorised Version New Testament, is a relatively corrupt text of the New Testament. On the other hand, they argued that the two fourth century Uncial texts, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (referred to by them as the 'Neutral Text' but now reckoned as part of the Alexandrian family), were but little removed from the original wording of the New Testament. These manuscripts, they argued, were to be followed unless there was very good evidence to prefer the reading of another family. The research of these gentlemen led to a general disparagement of the Received Text.

The modern period of Textual Criticism did not begin until the third decade of this century and did not then command much attention for a number of years. It began by recognising the limitations of the genealogical method. It is now generally recognised that Westcott and Hort made too much of the contrast between the Byzantine and the other families of texts. It is now believed that all of the textual families, to a greater or lesser extent, are recensions constructed from the older stock of variants. Each textual family is therefore the repository of a variety of ancient readings, some good, others not so good.

The consequences of this new assessment of the manuscript evidence has been the abandonment of the genealogical method of choosing between variants in favour of an eclectic method. No longer is any one manuscript, or even one textual family, followed in a slavish manner as if it were a far better reproduction of the original than any other. No longer is the Received Text treated with such disdain as if it were of no real value as a witness to the original. At each point where there is disagreement between the various manuscripts the various readings are examined to see which of the variants, if supposed original, could best explain the origin of the others.

In practice, most textual critics today use a combination of the two methods of criticism outlined above, taking notice both of the external and internal evidence relating to each reading. By external evidence we mean evidence concerning the distribution of a certain reading among the various manuscripts: if a reading is found in manuscripts belonging to different textual families it is more likely to be original than if it is found only among the manuscripts of one textual family. By internal evidence we mean a consideration of the various readings within the context of the particular passage of Scripture: which of the readings accords best with the style of the author? Which reading best fits the argument of the author at this point? Is any of the readings so absurd as to be obviously wrong? etc. All of these considerations must be weighed by the informed critic before a decision can be reached concerning the most likely form of the original.

Our Response to New Testament Textual Criticism

Textual Criticism is a complex and demanding discipline in which few of us will be capable of being active participants. It is all the more important therefore that we retain a balanced view of the discipline.

On the one hand, we should, not fail to appreciate the work that has been done on the New Testament manuscripts, work which continues today. The critical examination of the Greek lectionaries (all 2135 of them) has really only just begun. Much work remains to be done on the vast number of minuscule manuscripts. The scriptural quotations in the works of the Fathers of the early (and later) church deserve a great deal more attention. No doubt the next few decades will continue to produce several interesting and important pieces of research in these fields. We should not fail to show an interest in this discipline which seeks to establish a more accurate knowledge of the exact wording of the Word of God.

On the other hand, we need to avoid exaggerated views of this discipline, as if we are ignorant of the wording of the New Testament until textual criticism has revealed it to us. We should recognise rather that the text of the New Testament has been preserved to a most remarkable degree, and that whatever Greek text or English Bible we may choose to read - whether AV, NIV or whatever - we may be sure that what we read differs in no substantial sense from the very words written long ago by the various New Testament authors.

History

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