

Textual Criticism: An Introductory Survey

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“In 1844 when he was not yet thirty years of age, Tischendorf... began an extensive journey through the Near East in search of Biblical manuscripts. While visiting the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, he chanced to see some leaves of parchment in a waste-basket full of papers destined to light the oven of the monastery. On examination these proved to be part of a copy of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, written in an early Greek uncial script. He retrieved from the basket no fewer than forty-three such leaves, and the monk casually remarked that two basket loads of similarly discarded leaves had already been burned up! Later when Tischendorf was shown other portions of the same codex, he warned the monks that such things were too valuable to be used to stoke their fires. The forty-three leaves which he was permitted to keep contained portions of 1 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Nehemiah and Esther, and upon returning to Europe he deposited them in the University library at Leipzig, where they still remain. In 1846 he published their contents, naming them codex Frederico-Augustanus.

“In 1853 Tischendorf revisited the monastery of St. Catherine, hoping to acquire other portions of the same manuscript. The excitement which he had displayed on the occasion of his discovery during his first visit had made the monks cautious, and he could learn nothing further about the manuscript. In 1859 his travels took him back once more to Mount Sinai, this time under the patronage of the Czar of Russia, Alexander II. The day before he was scheduled to leave he presented to the steward of the monastery a copy of the edition of the Septuagint which he had recently published in Leipzig. Thereupon the steward remarked that he too had a copy of the Septuagint, and produced from a closet in his cell a manuscript wrapped in a red cloth. There before the astonished scholar’s eyes lay the treasure which he had been longing to see. Concealing his feelings, Tischendorf casually asked permission to look at it further that evening. Permission was granted, and upon retiring to his room Tischendorf stayed up all night in the joy of studying the manuscript – for, as he declared in his diary... ‘it really seemed a sacrilege to sleep’, he soon found that the document contained much more than he had even hoped; for not only was most of the Old Testament there, but also the New Testament was intact and in excellent condition, with the addition of two early Christian works of the second century, the Epistle of Barnabas. .and a large portion of the Shepherd of Hermas, hitherto known only by title.

“The next morning Tischendorf tried to buy the manuscript, but without success. Then he asked to be allowed to take it to Cairo to study; but the monk in charge of the altar plate objected, and so he had to leave without it.

“Later, while in Cairo, where the monks of Sinai have also a small monastery, Tischendorf importuned the abbot of the monastery of St. Catherine, who happened to be in Cairo at the time, to send for the document. Thereupon swift Bedouin messengers were sent to fetch the manuscript to Cairo, and it was agreed that Tischendorf would be allowed to have it quire by quire to copy it. Two Germans who happened to be at Cairo and who knew some Greek, an apothecary and a bookseller, helped him transcribe the manuscript and Tischendorf revised carefully what they copied. In two months they transcribed 110,000 lines of text.

“The next stage of the negotiations involved what may be called euphemistically ‘ecclesiastical diplomacy’. At that time the highest place of authority among the monks of Sinai was vacant. Tischendorf suggested that it would be to their advantage if they would make a gift to the Czar of Russia, whose influence, as protector of the Greek Church, they desired in connexion with the election of the new abbot – and what could be more appropriate as a gift than this Greek manuscript! After prolonged negotiations the precious codex was delivered to Tischendorf for publication at Leipzig and for presentation to the Czar in the name of the monks... In 1862, on the one-thousandth anniversary of the founding of the Russian Empire, the text of the manuscript was published in magnificent style at the expense of the Czar in four folio volumes...

“...After the revolutions in Russia, the USSR, not being interested in the Bible and being in need of money, negotiated with the Trustees of the British Museum for the sale of the codex for \$500,000... Just before Christmas Day, 1933, the manuscript was carried under guard into the British Museum.”

So we let Bruce Metzger in his book *The Text of the New Testament* introduce us to the scholarly, often interesting, occasionally romantic and at times misunderstood discipline of textual criticism. It shall be our purpose in this paper to provide a very basic introduction to this discipline. In so doing we will talk about

- I. **The Making of Early Books**
- II. **The Cause of Variant Readings**
- III. **The Science of Choosing the Readings**
- IV. **The Most Important Manuscripts**
- V. **The Prevailing School of Thought. (Westcott and Hort)**
- VI. **The Case Against the Textus Receptus.**

I.

We who live in the days of huge web-fed presses, sophisticated copy machines and mass produced literature which enable many churches to give away copies of the Scriptures on evangelism visits will find it somewhat difficult to identify with the scribe who sat with his parchment on his knees, his quill in hand and his copy of the Scriptures opened to the first page of the several thousand in the Bible. He faced a task of incredible proportions, to copy by hand for several years, page after page in dim light, in damp and cold accommodations and for very long hours. Each copy of Scripture for 1400 years was a treasure, the value of which could scarcely be measured in dollars and cents. For that many years, there were only “manuscripts” of Scripture, that is “hand written” copies.

All of these manuscripts were written on either papyrus or parchment. Paper had not yet been invented and would not become common until late in the middle ages. Papyrus was made by pressing together thin slices of the triangular reed that grew in the Nile delta . One layer was laid east and west and the other pressed onto it with the grain running north and south. Parchment or vellum was made from the skin of cattle, sheep, goats and antelope. After the hair had been scraped off, the skim was washed, smoothed with pumice: and dressed with chalk to provide a very fine writing surface.

For many centuries the materials were sewn together into long strips 30 to 35 feet in length and then rolled up from either end to form what we call a scroll. The scroll was seldom written on both sides. The columns, usually two to three inches wide, ran perpendicular to the length of the strip,

About the time that the Christians began to copy the books of the New Testament, a new method developed of binding together the folds of many leaves on a common spine into what was called a codex. This forerunner of our present day books made it easier to include all the Gospels in one volume, or all the Pauline Epistles, which would have required a number of scrolls. The codex was also far better suited to paging back and forth to consult proof texts, not to mention the fact that the expensive writing material could be used on both sides very conveniently.

Because of its grain, the papyrus had its own built in lines on one side, while on the other side, it was quite difficult to write against the grain. Parchment had no such grain so the scribes pricked a series of holes on either edge and scored lines between the pinpricks. The letters hung from these lines rather than resting on them as they do in our writing.

Two styles of writing existed from the New Testament days: **cursive**, being used in everyday writings, but almost never in the manuscripts of the Bible, and “**uncials**”, a type of printing which utilized only capital letters. Around the time of the Ninth Century a reform in writing took place and smaller letters called “minuscules” written in a running hand began to be used almost exclusively. Minuscules were more economical since they could be written far more rapidly than uncials and much more of the text could be written on a single page of minuscule manuscript than of uncial. Partly for these reasons of economics minuscule manuscripts out-

number uncials ten to one. Because of the high cost of writing material, not a few of the uncial manuscripts that have been discovered are palimpsests, that is, they are copies of the Bible written earlier and then erased at a later time to allow some other text to be written on the recycled parchment. One out of five of the uncial manuscripts extant are palimpsests. Modern methods utilizing ultra-violet light and chemicals have enabled scholars to read the erased text which is always more valuable to us than its successor.

The scribes utilized a type of writing called *scriptio continua* which means that they wrote all the letters right next to each other with no gaps between the words. Such a method could at times make it difficult to determine where the divisions between the words were to be placed. As an example the words Godisnowhere could be divided in either of the following two ways: God is now here, or God is nowhere.

The scribes also made frequent use of contractions for writing familiar words. The name of God, *Theos*, was often written *Ths* with a line over it to show that the word was contracted. *Christos*, the name Christ, was written *Chs* or *Chrs* very often.

From the earliest days of the New Testament copies were made by individuals either for themselves or for others. But because Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman empire until the Fourth Century, very few copies were made by professional scribes in establishments called *scriptoria*. After Constantine became a Christian and ordered 50 deluxe copies of Scriptures to be produced, the scriptoria begin to play an important role in the production of manuscripts of the Bible the scriptoria of the Fourth Century a lector would read and several scribes would write what they heard him read. Naturally such a system had flaws. A momentary lapse in attention, a cough or some other noise might cause a scribe to miss a word or syllable. In addition the problem of homonyms was a frequent threat to accuracy. The English words great/grate and there/their will serve as examples of the problem. A corrector had the job of proofreading the finished product but many errors slipped past his eyes. Producing a book in such a manner was extremely costly. A Bible at that time could cost approximately thirty years pay.

During the Byzantine Period, from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries most of the copy work was done by monks who simply copied individually rather than listening to dictation. Such a method had its own problems, involving the following four steps: 1. Reading; 2. Retaining in memory; 3. Dictating from memory; 4. Hand movement. Considering the magnitude of the effort entailed in making such copies it is not surprising that the scribes often added a verse of rejoicing at the end of their labor such as, "The End of the Book; Thanks be to God!"

In addition to the actual text of Scripture, the scribe often copied the notes or "glosses" written in the margins of the manuscript from which he was copying. Frequently such notes served as a running commentary on the text and served to lengthen the overall project of copying considerably. At times the glosses found their way into the text itself and became responsible for some of the variant readings in Scripture.

II .

We have alluded to some of the causes of variant readings above. There were many other causes as well. Faulty eyesight and poor handwriting are doubtless responsible for a host of variants. Certain Greek letters looked quite similar, notably *sigma*, *epsilon*, *theta* and *omicron*; as well as *gamma*, *pi* and *tau*. Two *lambda*'s written too close together become a *mu*. A *lambda* and an *iota* run together form a *nu*.

When two lines in the manuscript being copied happen to end in the same word, words or syllable, the eyes of the scribe might wander from the first to the second, accidentally omitting an entire line or passage lying between the endings. Such an omission is called *parablepsis*. Its cousin is called *dittography* and consists in copying the same word or line twice.

Faulty hearing we have referred to already in the case of homonyms. But additional problems occurred when in later years several of the letters of the Greek alphabet came to be pronounced in a very similar way. Often variants occur when the Greek word "your" is confused with "our". Errors of the mind might cause the scribe to invert the word order of a sentence or the order of letters in a word sometimes with disastrous effects. One manuscript which at John 5:39 ought to read "they bear witness concerning me," reads instead "they are

sinning concerning me.” Another error of the mind was likely to occur when a scribe would unconsciously substitute a synonym for the original word, such as “apostle” for “disciple”. Very often the wording of a passage was inadvertently expanded to include the wording of a parallel but longer passage familiar to the scribe. So in Col. 1:14 “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” a few manuscripts add the words “through His blood”, a phrase derived from the parallel in Eph. 1: 7.

Errors of judgment constitute another kind of unintentional change in the text of many manuscripts. We’ve already mentioned that on occasion notes standing in the margins of some manuscripts have found their way into the text in others. This may be the explanation for the reading at John 5:4 in which the moving of the water is attributed to an angel which “went down to the pool at a certain season”. In one humorous case the scribe wrote in the text the observation of an early textual critic, so that St. Paul is made to say, “they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints who received us (it is found thus in many of the copies)”. In another horrible blunder a scribe who was copying the genealogy of Christ in the Gospel of Luke didn’t realize that there were three columns in the list and copied straight across. Consequently, everyone was given the wrong father, God was said to be the son of Aram and Phares was the father of the whole human race, rather than God.

There were also a number of categories of intentional changes that the scribes inflicted on the text of Scripture at different times. Occasionally they felt they could improve the grammar, style, spelling or logic of the writer and were not averse to doing so. Sometimes quotes of Old Testament passages were “improved” by the scribe to bring them into harmony with the Septuagint, and early Greek translation of the Old Testament, many of whose passages the scribes knew by heart.

On those occasions where the scribe was copying from two manuscripts, if they did not agree, it was not uncommon for him to combine the two. If one text said “praising” and the other “blessing”, the scribe might write “praising and blessing”. Occasionally alterations were also made due to doctrinal considerations. Marcion, an early heretic, rewrote the Gospels eliminating all references to the Jewish background of Jesus. At Luke 1:3 where Luke says-, “It seemed good to me to write an account”, some manuscripts have inserted “and to the Holy Spirit” to help Luke speak more in line with the doctrine of inspiration. Still another cause of variants was the occasional inclusion of the names of saints referred to in Scripture but not named by the original writer. One scribe gave the name Stephanus as the name of the jailer at Philippi. Another named the companion of Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, Simon.

Lest we get the impression that what we have in our Scripture is only a guess and not the inspired Word of God we need to remember that by far the vast majority of variants are extremely minor in nature so as to not affect the meaning of the text. A good share of the rest are so obviously mistakes of scribes that they cause no difficulty. And the conclusion that Johann Bengel reached in the 1700’s after extended study of the variants is still true today. He said that there are far fewer variants than one would have expected given the method of transcription. Those that do exist do not shake any article of evangelical doctrine.

III.

There is moreover a science of choosing between the various readings. A number of standard rules have been laid down which are based on common sense more than anything else. One rule states that “the difficult reading is to be preferred to the easy one.” The reasoning behind what seems to be a backward rule is that a scribe is more likely to make a difficult construction easy than to make more difficult what already is easy. In other words if a section is difficult to translate into good sense, the scribe is more likely to modify it to make it easier to translate than he is to throw into it additional difficulties.

A second important dictum reads, “Manuscripts must be evaluated by their weight not by their number.” The reasoning behind such a rule is this. Most manuscripts are of more recent origin. That means they have been copied from earlier manuscripts. It seems that certain manuscripts, perhaps because of their location and availability were copied far more than others. The result is that great numbers of manuscripts are very similar to each other. They incorporated the errors more or less of their manuscript ancestor. Manuscripts can in fact be

grouped by family tree, so to speak. If one family tree is very large and another is very small but contains very ancient manuscripts, the small family can be given just as much weight in making textual decisions as the large family, because it is as close to the original as the father of the large family.

A third rule of criticism states that “the shorter reading is to be preferred.” The rule rests on the notion that a scribe is far more likely to add than to delete something from the manuscript.

One more rule advises that the critic “choose the reading which best explains the origin of the others.” Common sense is at the root of this guideline also.

IV.

Manuscripts of the Greek New Testament are categorized according to the writing material used, according to the type of script used and according to what the manuscript was to be used for. There are four basic categories: **papyri** (those written on papyrus) 81 are extant; **uncials** (those written in the large uncial script) 266 are extant; **minuscule** (those written in the smaller minuscule script) 2754 are extant; and **lectionaries** (those collections of readings selected to be used during the church year on given Sundays, i.e., portions of the Bible) 2135 are extant. By way of comparison there are only 647 manuscripts of the Iliad, the “bible” of Greek mythology.

Some of the more important manuscripts include the following: The Chester Beatty papyri designated p⁴⁶ is a copy of most of the Epistles of St. Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews. 86 of the original 104 pages are still in existence. P⁴⁶ is significant because it dates from about the year 200 A. D., making it the oldest of the manuscripts of any length containing the Pauline Epistles.

The Bodmer papyri designated p⁶⁶ is the oldest copy of the Gospel of John of any length. Scholars have fixed its date at 200 A. D. or earlier. 104 leaves are still in existence. Another of the Bodmer papyri, p⁷⁵, is from about the same time and contains the Gospels of Luke and John. It may be even more significant because the text seems to come from a more reliable “family” than that of p⁶⁶.

Perhaps the most significant papyrus of all is the John Rylands papyrus, p⁵². This little fragment measures only 2 ½” X 3½” but scholars have fixed the date of its writing between 100 and 150 A. D. It is therefore the earliest known manuscript of the N.T. and may have been written by a contemporary of the original author. The effect of its discovery in 1984 was to discredit the entire school of thought that had speculated that the Gospel of John had not been written by the Apostle but was not written until as late as 160 A. D. P⁵² proves that the Gospel according to John must have been written very early, as orthodox theologians have always taught.

Among the uncial manuscripts Codex Sinaiticus, about which we have spoken already at length, is joined by Codex Alexandrinus and Codex Vaticanus as the most significant manuscripts which contain almost the whole Bible as we know it today. Vaticanus omits the Book of Revelation, 46 chapters of Genesis, 30 Psalms, and several Epistles. The remarkable aspect of these three is that they are from as early as 325-400 A. D. In fact, scholars have speculated that Sinaiticus and Vaticanus may have been two of the 50 copies of the Bible commissioned by Emperor Constantine.

A leaf from Codex Purpureus Petropolitanus, a deluxe edition written on purple vellum with silver and gold letters is in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Several other manuscripts are in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington and at the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor.

V.

The prevailing school of thought in textual criticism today is that developed by two English scholars B.F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort toward the end of the 19th Century.

They theorized that there are four basic families of texts which they termed Western, Alexandrian, Neutral and Syrian. The Western, Alexandrian and Neutral families are the earliest we know of and are therefore the most reliable. The Syrian, however, is the most common manuscript because its ancestor was a

combination of the other three put together late in the 4th Century to serve as a smoother standard text from which copies could be made and disseminated throughout the Byzantine worlds

They further theorize that this “edited” manuscript was the one most commonly copied by the monks during the monastic period from 400 A. D. to the invention of the printing press in 1450 A. D. The significance of the Westcott and Hort system is that it relegates to lesser importance the vast majority of manuscripts and puts great emphasis particularly on the two great early uncials Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

VI.

The importance of all this to us in the 20th Century and to our Congregations is its effect upon the new translations of Holy Scripture being published so regularly today. But let us lead up to that with a discussion of the “Textus Receptus.”

It was not until 1450 that Johann Gutenberg perfected movable type and used it to print a large number of Latin Bibles. And it was not until 1516 that the first printed Greek Bible was published. Really there were two Greek Bibles printed at about the same time early in the 1500’s. The one called the “Complutensian Polyglot” was 10 years in the making and made an effort to present the Greek text with as reliable a set of readings as were available. Much research went into the printing of the Polyglot.

The other edition of the Greek was the work of Erasmus and represented a rush job. The printer Johann Froben saw the need for and market for a Greek edition and at the same time saw the advantage of issuing such an edition before or near the publication date of the Polyglot. He and Erasmus in 1515 set out to publish a Greek Testament. Erasmus took the best manuscripts available at Basel in July of 1515 but found them to be inferior and incomplete. He therefore made corrections on them and places even translated the Latin into Greek to complete them, and rushed the texts to the printer, who began printing in October 1515 and completed the job by March 1 of 1516. The incredibly short time taken to publish the text resulted in hundreds of typographical errors. In addition, as could be expected, the translations Erasmus made from the Latin into Greek resulted in readings which are nowhere else recorded in any Greek manuscript. Indeed Erasmus even invented a word in Rev, 17:4, meaning uncleanness, a word which nowhere else occurs in any Greek literature.

The text was printed, however, and was considerably cheaper and more available than the Polyglot. It was therefore far more widely used and read and became, with all its errors and imperfections, the basis of virtually every succeeding Greek text until almost the Twentieth Century.

In 1633, the Elzevir edition made the statement that its text which was based on Erasmus’s text was “the text which is now received by all.” Hence the designation “Received Text” or “Textus Receptus” (TR). This TR was the basis of the translation authorised by King James in 1611 and also at least in part of Luther’s translation of 1534.

Indeed, a kind of superstition developed about this Received Text. Anyone who suggested that readings were preferred to the reading of the TR was either ignored or persecuted for questioning the authority of Scripture. So in the late 1800’s when the Revised Version was published it came in for some scathing attacks at the hands of the defenders of the TR because it adopted some of the variant readings of the earlier manuscripts. Even today some critics maintain that the Received Text is the one God wanted preserved and therefore it became the basis of the KJV and so many Greek editions. Yet it would seem at least a standoff if the textual critics should argue that the Lord is working through them to aid in the restoration of the corrupted text. The comforting fact in the debate is that we are not faced with any variants which affect the doctrinal content of Scripture.

It can be unnerving to find in Bible Class that your copy of the NIV omits John 5:4 while the KJV includes it. It may disturb us to find that in I John 5 Verses 7-9 are considerably shorter than in the KJV; and that a text which seemed to support the doctrine of the Trinity is eliminated. But when we understand the reasons behind such an omission we can hardly quarrel with the decision.

It seems that the longer reading was in no Greek manuscripts until Erasmus under criticism stated that if only one such manuscript could be found, he would include it in his text. Whereupon at length such a copy was

found or rather was made to order! As it now appears, the Greek manuscript had probably been written in Oxford about 1520 by a Franciscan friar named Roy, who took the disputed words from the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus stood by his promise and inserted the passage in his third edition. But would anyone today suggest that such a reading is correct?

Rather let us realize that the miracle is in the preservation of the text as to its doctrinal content and that the discipline of textual criticism is a God-pleasing endeavor that in no way threatens our faith or our orthodoxy.

For additional information on this subject the student is referred to: Metzger, Bruce Manning, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York. Oxford. 1968) , whose work the writer has tried to summarize with some degree of accuracy.