

The Scriptures IV: Textual Criticism

Introduction

In our last session we considered how the people of God both during the Old and New Covenants had to recognize which books were inspired by the Holy Spirit

However, “inspiration” applies only to the original manuscripts (the autographs) written by the apostles and the prophets and given that today, we no longer have the original manuscripts, the church must use the available copies which brings us to the subject of **Textual Criticism.**

At the outset, we must admit that this is a difficult subject to handle in an edifying and simple way, in the limited scope of our class, but we hope to accomplish the task, the Lord willing

In the first place:

I- Definition and Classification of Textual Criticism

In simple words, textual criticism deals with the reliability and trustworthiness of the available manuscripts we possess of the Scriptures

There are two types of textual criticism: higher criticism and lower criticism

Higher criticism deals with the external factors that influenced the writing of each Bible Book as a way to gauge its reliability. Higher criticism asks questions like: Who, when and Why was this book written &c

Some enemies of the truth have delved into this field seeking to diminish the reliability of the Scriptures, but a good number of Christian scholars have been able to solidly answer some of the real or supposed difficulties raised by the higher critics

We will not consider higher criticism, since this is a subject which is better covered under the general studies of Introduction to the NT and OT

Lower criticism on the other hand, deals with the available manuscripts, which are not perfect, in order to recover as best as possible the original text of the autographs; therefore from this point forward, any reference to textual criticism will exclusively address lower criticism

What are some of the main difficulties encountered with the manuscripts we possess? Sometimes there are problems with the use of numbers in the OT (For example 2 Kings 24:8-9 comp to 2 Chronicles 36:9.); sometimes a manuscript shows a particular Word which differs from the one used in another manuscript for example (John 1:18), and sometimes there are verses which appear in a given family of manuscripts and not in others &c

There is no instance in which the variants that bring discussion as to whether or not a text or word is reliable, affects any Scriptural Doctrine. The message is the same regardless of the position we assume about any manuscript. Both the OT & NT manuscripts are very reliable, much more than any other document from antiquity

What rules have been followed to decide which manuscript to choose before the presence of a variant in the text? I quote from pastor Sugel Michelen.

- 1-Give preference to the oldest variant.
- 2-Give preference to the most difficult variant
- 3-Give preference to the shortest variant
- 4-Give preference to the variant that better explains all other variants
- 5-Give preference to the variant that is better supported geographically
- 6-Give preference to the variant that that better fits the diction and style of the author
- 7- Give preference to the variant that does not reflect any doctrinal partiality

The result of applying these rules to the texts of the OT and NT will be explained as follows

II- Textual Criticism applied to the Old Testament

In the case of the OT even though we do not have too many copies we can affirm that the text is reliable, because of the care exercised in the copying process evidenced by the similitude that exists between manuscripts whose composition is separated by hundreds of years

For example:

1) The masoretic text manuscripts have few variants

The most authorized text for the OT is the Masoretic Text. The masorets were well-educated Jews who between the years 500 y 900 AD copied whatever OT they had available to edit it and establish a pattern

They made a remarkable labor because as someone has said: *“they handled the text with the highest imaginable reverence and they established an intricate safeguard system to prevent oversights. For example they counted the number of times of each letter in each book; they marked the central letter in the Pentateuch, and the central letter in the entire Bible and they even made more complex things.”*(Quoted by Josh McDowell in Evidence that demands a Verdict, pg.57.)

Another author concludes: *“These trivialities, which in honesty is what we should deem about them, were however the means to ensure that a rigorous attention was devoted to the exact transmission of the text... Truly, the Masorets were concerned that not on jot, title, or small letter, nor the small part of a letter or the law, were neglected or lost.”* (Ibíd., pg.58)

From this labor of the Masorets there exist around 6 families of manuscripts known as the codices, from the year 900 to approximately 1100 AD. It is likely that the Masoretic text stems from one dated circa 100 AD

2 *The agreement with the Samaritan Pentateuch*

3 *The almost literal agreement between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text.*

Laird Harris says: “If we discarded our Hebrew Bibles, the Septuagint, even when it reads strange in some passages, would be a very satisfactory copy of the Old Testament. In fact, during the first three centuries of the Christian Church and when most Christians spoke Greek fluently, the Septuagint was used almost exclusively” (quoted by NLG; pg. 253-254).

4 *The Dead Sea scrolls discovery.*

If the oldest Hebrew manuscripts we possess are from 900 AD; how do we know that the message has not been corrupted alter more than 900 years from the time of Jesus Christ? The answer is that aside from the accuracy with which these manuscripts were copied, we have the evidence of the Dead Sea scrolls.

This has been without a doubt, the greatest Discovery in manuscripts during modern times. These rolls were discovered in several caves throughout the northwestern corner of the Dead Sea in 1947. There were different writings, including complete copies or fragments of each OT book en Hebrew, except from the Book of Esther

It is believed that these OT scrolls were copied around 100 BC that is, a thousand years earlier than the oldest manuscripts available for the OT, and the result is that the textual variants are minimum. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls proved that the Biblical text we have for the OT is essentially safe

III- Textual Criticism applied to the New Testament

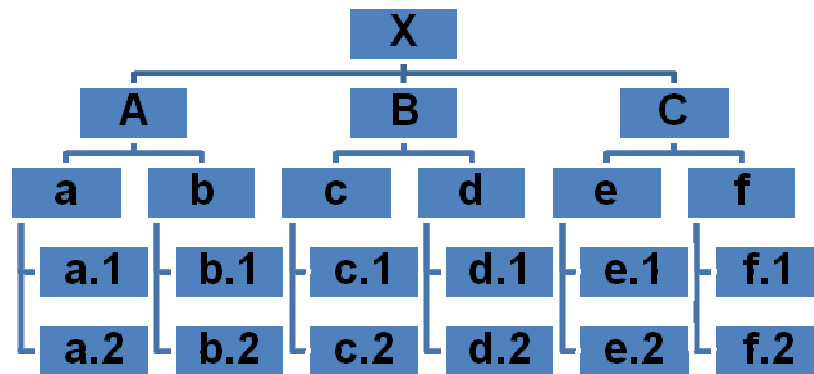
The reliability of the NT text does not lie as much in the carefulness exercised in the producing of copies, but rather in the amazing abundance of complete NT copies, or of fragments, and their relative nearness to their time of composition.

The reliability of the manuscripts is reinforced when one compares older versions of the NT with the quotes found by the church fathers in their writings

1- The abundant manuscripts of the Greek NT in Greek.

There exists today a catalog of about 5,500 of the entire NT or of fragments, some of which were very close to the original time of composition. Remember that the NT was written between the years 45 – 95 AD and there are copies of fragments from the second century.

The variety of copies available is illustrated per below diagram:



If we compare the quantity of NT manuscripts and their proximity to one another, with famous literary works from antiquity, we will notice an abysmal difference. The existing copies of these famous works, are about 5, 7, 10 &c and their proximity to the original time of writing is generally over 1,000 years.

Note of translation: how easily people attribute corruption and error to the NT writings, while they quote Plato, Cicero and others with unquestioned trust. It is just another

sample of how “men suppress the truth in unrighteousness”, not in a display of scientific honesty

2- The variety of antique versions.

There are NT translations in Syrian, Egyptian, Armenian and other languages, from the first centuries of the Christian era, and they show a significant agreement with the Greek Manuscripts.

3- Quotes from Church Fathers

It is commonly affirmed, that the quotes from the early Church Fathers of the NT text are so abundant that had all of the Greek Manuscripts been destroyed, the NT would have been able to be reconstructed almost in its entirety.

During the time of the Protestant Reformation the translators of the NT, had basically one Greek copy of the NT prepared by Erasmus of Rotterdam which he called the **Textus Receptus**. However, Erasmus did not have some of the best manuscripts readily available reason why there appear some hence some textual interpolations in this text

There are 22 considerable additions being the most significant ones: **1Jn 5:7; Mk 16:9-20; Jn 5:4 and Jn 7:53 to 8:11**. However, as previously stated, even if we removed these texts from the NT, the content of the gospel message remains intact and there is no doctrine in question from the Word of God.

Today, the amount of information we have available as well as the discovery of older manuscripts has enabled scholars to reconstruct the text of the NT in such a way, that the reliability and trustworthiness of the text it's even higher

It is highly recommendable to own a textual Bible, which is a version that clearly shows the possible interpolations or additions to the sacred text with a pertinent explanation

Conclusion

Wayne Grudem writes: *“For over 99% of the words of the Bible we know what the original manuscript said. Including for many of the verses in which there are textual variants (that is words that are different in different copies of the same verse), the correct choice is often very clear... and in fact, there are very few places in which the original text variant may be hard to ascertain or even crucial to determine the meaning of the text. In the small percentage of cases where there exists considerable uncertainty with respect to the original text, the overall of the phrase is made very clear by the context... Generally speaking, the current scholarly published texts for the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament are the same of the original manuscripts.”* (Biblical Doctrine Pg.45)

In a TIME Magazine article the following has been written as quoted by pastor Sugel Michelen: *“... After more than two centuries facing heavy artillery attacks, the Bible has survived– and it is probably better prepared for the attack. Even in the same turf of the critics – historical facts – the Bible appears more acceptable now than when rationalism started the attack.”*

[Note of Translation:](#) we have not been able to locate this article for a precise quote or reference

Spurgeon wrote: *‘The Bible has passed through the crucible of persecution, literary criticism, philosophical doubt and scientific discovery, and it has not anything except those human interpretations that adhere to it as alloys on precious metals ...’*

“This is absolutely true. The infidels in all ages have struck against this rock, but the Word of God remains firm and at the end... infidels will be crushed by the rock instead of being to break it” (Psalms; Vol. 1; Pg. 103).

We thank God for having preserved His word in the copies of the manuscripts so that we may say with confidence: “thus says the Lord” May our consciences be bound to the Scriptures and not to the Doctrines and Traditions of men