

A BIBLICAL CREDIBILITY CRISIS

adapted in part from Dr. W.N. Pickering (1990)

If we wanted to be certain that a copy of the American Constitution were perfectly accurate, we could compare it with the original hand-written document at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. However, such is not possible with the New Testament – all of its original manuscripts penned by Paul, Peter and other apostles in the first century A.D. have disappeared. Nearly all of the copies of those originals made during the early centuries thereafter were worn out, destroyed by the Roman Caesars, or remain undiscovered.

As a result of the discovery of a number of early manuscripts in the 19th century, questions arose concerning the original wording of the N.T. Although these differed significantly in many places from the Traditional Greet text, many scholars concluded they were better copies of the originals because they were “older”. This new approach led to Greek texts based largely upon a handful or a minority of early manuscripts.

The original manuscripts of the books of the New Testament were hand copied over and over again and copies were made from various generations of copies. As a result, numerous variant readings came to appear in New Testament manuscripts. Some of these were merely variations of spelling. Others were far more serious: (1) additions of words or phrases; (2) omissions of words, phrases, clauses, and whole sentences and paragraphs. These variant readings arose either from the inadvertent errors of copyists, or from the efforts of “scholars” (whether well-meaning or otherwise) to correct or even to improve the text.

It is the task of textual critics to ascertain just what the original reading was at every point in the New Testament text where a variant reading exists. This they do by sifting through a massive quantity of manuscript evidence, supposedly with great care. However, there are different schools of thought among textual critics, each with its own set of presuppositions and criteria for evaluating the authenticity of a reading and the relative importance of a given manuscript. Before accepting the conclusions of a particular textual critic, one should evaluate both his theological presuppositions and criteria.

The New Testaments of the King James Bible, William Tyndale’s Bible Luther’s German Bible, Olivetan’s French Bible, the Geneva Bible (English), as well as many other vernacular versions of the Protestant Reformation were translated from the Greek Text of Stephens, 1550, which (with the Elzevir Text of 1624) is commonly called the *Textus Receptus*, or the Received Text (TR). It is the “Traditional Text” (T.T.) that has been read and preserved by the Greek Orthodox Church throughout the centuries. From it came the Peshitta, the Italic, Celtic, Gallic, and Gothic Bibles, the medieval versions of the evangelical Waldenses and Albigenses, and other versions suppressed by Rome during the Middle Ages. Though many copies were ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed, the Received Text has been preserved by an Almighty Providence.

This “Traditional Text” is also referred to as the “majority text”(**), since it is represented by about 95 percent of the manuscript evidence. This is in sharp contrast to the Westcott-Hort tradition (which leans heavily on two manuscripts of the unreliable Alexandrian Text type), the shaky foundation of nearly all of today’s versions. In the 16th century, Erasmus and the Reformers knowingly rejected the Gnostic readings of the Alexandrian Codex Vaticanus B and other old uncial (i.e., all capital letters with no spaces between words = MSS) manuscripts, whose variant reading they judged to be corrupt. They regarded such dubious “treasures” as the products of scribes who had altered the text to suit their own private interpretations. They also rejected Jerome’s Latin Vulgate as a corrupt version and as an improper basis for vernacular translations.

The earliest known portion of the N.T. is Papyruus P-52 (until 1995 when the Magdalen Papyrus was dated as A.D. 66 & found to contain TR/KJB readings!). Also known as “John Rylands Greek 457”, this 2.5 by 3.5 inch fragment is usually dated about A.D. 125 and contains John 18:31-33, 37-38. The earliest extant copy containing a complete book is Papyrus 72. Dated around 300, it contains all of I

and II Peter and Jude. About 70 Greek MSS have been assigned a date earlier than 400 A.D., but almost all of them are very fragmentary. Where these do overlap, significant disagreement is usually found among them as to the correct wording. Around 190 Greek copies have been dated between A.D. 400-800. Most of these are also fragmentary, and they differ considerably where they overlap. As of 800 A.D., only eight extant Greek MSS contain all four gospels in essentially their entirety. Of these, only five contain all of Romans and two all of Revelation.

Of the 3,000 plus Greek manuscripts of the N.T., about 1700 are from the 12th – 14th centuries. They, along with 640 copies from the 9th – 11th centuries, are in basic agreement on approximately 99% of the words of the N.T. As a group, however, this majority disagree considerably with most of the copies from the early centuries – which also differ considerably among themselves. This, then, is the situation that has given rise to the debate over the original wording of the New Testament. Nevertheless, despite all the variations, nearly all of the words of the N.T. enjoy over 99% attestation from the extant Greek MSS/mss. Only about 2% have less than 95% support and fewer than 1% of the words have less than 80% (and most of these differ only slightly).

Yet for the past 100 years, the world of scholarship has been dominated by the view that this majority text is a secondary and inferior text. Scholars have rejected that we have had the true text of the originals all along and have thus attempted to reconstruct the original text of the N.T. on the basis of the few early manuscripts. But editors of the dominant eclectic Greek text of today have usually followed a single Greek MSS and in dozens of places they have printed a text not found in any known Greek copy! The discrepancy between this eclectic text and the majority reading is about 8%. That would amount to 48 full pages of discrepancies in a 600 page text. Around 1/5 of that represents omissions in the “minority text” such that it is about 10 pages shorter than the majority text. Nearly all modern versions of the Bible are based on this “minority text” whereas the King James is based on an identical twin brother of the “majority text”. This is why so many verses, phrases, etc. familiar to users of the KJB are missing in the modern versions.

The question is which of these two Greek texts is the Word of God? There are a number of reasons for rejecting these early MSS as spurious. An inquiry reveals that the “majority text” has dominated the stream of transmission down through the centuries because the Church considered it to be the God given text. It has the greatest geographic distribution as well as the longest continuity throughout time. The “minority text” never circulated widely within the Church, and it virtually disappeared after the 4th century. Further, they have few direct descendants, demonstrating that they were rejected in their day – not deemed worthy of copying. The undisputed fact that the early minority copies not only differ from the majority but also differ significantly among themselves undermines their credibility as valid witnesses to the true text.

It is often stated that no matter what Greek text one may use no Christian doctrine is actually affected, hence, the whole controversy is but a “tempest in a teapot”. No so, for although as many as half of the differences between the “majority” and “minority” texts be termed “inconsequential”, about 25 pages of significant discrepancies remain – and the “minority” omits words from the text that total 10 pages.

Moreover, the “minority text” has introduced some unequivocal errors which make the doctrine of inerrancy indefensible. For example, Matthew 1:7 and 1:10 list Asaph and Amos, two non-existent kings, in Christ’s genealogy whereas the Traditional Text correctly reads “Asa” and “Amon”. Luke 23:45 has a scientific error in the Minority reading. Here it is stated that the sun was eclipsed (Gr. eklipontos) at Christ’s death, but this is impossible as the Passover always occurs during the time of the full moon. An eclipse of the sun can occur only during the new moon phase. The T.T. reads “the sun was darkened” (eskitisthe). The Minority Text of John 7:8 relates Jesus telling his brothers that He is not going to the feast; then two verses later, He goes. No contradiction exists in the T.T. which records Jesus as saying “I am not yet going.”

The result of this is that although most major Christian doctrine is not at risk (though several such as eternal judgment, the ascension and the deity of Jesus are significantly weakened), two are.

Total havoc is played upon the doctrine of Divine Inspiration due to the plain errors of fact and contradictions incorporated in the eclectic text of the N.T. Divine inspiration becomes relative, and the doctrine of the Scriptures being the infallible deposit of God's Word to man becomes untenable.

Thus modern scholarship has perniciously undermined the credibility of the New Testament text. This credibility crisis has been forced upon the attention of the laity by the modern versions that enclose parts of the text in brackets and add numerous footnotes that are often inaccurate and slanted which raise doubt as to the integrity of the text. Moreover, this credibility crisis is being exported around the world through the translations and revisions of the N.T. that are based on the eclectic text.

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***Recently, several Greek N.T.'s have been published under the designation "Majority Text". Therefore, in this work the term "majority" is capitalized when referring to a single entity but is left in small letters when the word "majority" is intended with regard to the whole body of extant Greek manuscripts (i.e., as opposed to the "minority" of the mss).*