

# On the Nature of Biblical Textual Criticism

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Textual criticism is a science which has been practiced for centuries. It exists because peoples wish to verify or possess a text which is free of falsifications or corruptions. What indeed was the formula or the mixture of ingredients which served to preserve ancient Egyptian mummies? Egyptian priests of circa 800 B.C. needed to know the precise amounts of each ingredient which their predecessors from circa 2000 B.C. used. It is easy to imagine that they carefully examined the documents from bygone days so as to maintain their craft. If a potion or portion was lost or damaged, they would have to reconstruct the text from other copies. If the copies were inaccurate, then some common sense was needed to reconstruct what the true and original formula was. This effort defines classical textual criticism.

Other definitions often appear thusly:

The object of all textual criticism is to recover so far as possible the actual words written by the writer.

[Kirsopp Lake, *The Text of the New Testament*, London, 1900. page 1.]

A bit fuller is Tov's definition:

Textual criticism deals with the origin and nature of all forms of a text, in our case the biblical text. This involves a discussion of its putative original form(s) and an analysis of the various representatives of the changing biblical text. The analysis includes a discussion of the relation between these texts, and attempts are made to describe the external conditions of the copying and the procedure of textual transmission. Scholars involved in textual criticism not only collect data on differences between the textual witnesses, but they also try to evaluate them. Textual criticism deals only with data deriving from the textual transmission—in other words, readings included in textual witnesses which have been created at an earlier stage, that of the literary growth of the biblical books, are not subjected to the textual evaluation.

[Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, page 1]

Establishing the text as it was originally written, lies at the heart of most definitions. In fact this may serve as THE purpose of textual criticism as understood and practiced by most acolytes of the discipline. This purpose and the above definitions serve quite adequately when the texts under examination are of human origins—that is, texts created and copied by humans. However these definitions and purpose are inadequate when the text under examination was not created by humans, though copied by humans. Such is the case with the original Biblical documents.

Consequently the definition and purpose of textual criticism differs from that which is solely concerned with texts created purely by humans. In fact Biblical textual criticism is radically handicapped when it operates within the confines of the typical methodology of classical textual criticism.

Biblical textual criticism, in general, has been operating under the constraints of classical scholarship; under the canons of classical textual criticism, and as a result the field is stagnant. Many modern critics appear as drunken men wandering aimlessly amidst floating bubbles of pretty colors, a landscape of transitory values and endless bubbles. The whole field has floundered over issues not germane to the task at hand. Trifling diversions, useless investigations and extravagant theories have plagued the efforts to really contribute to BIBLICAL textual criticism.

Years of this kind of aimless intellectual pursuits has left, nay robbed the present generation of useful results. Instead of a sense of trustworthiness today's Bible readers are left with a vacuum, empty like the fruits of nihilism. Instead of a sense of affirmation or validation today's Bible students are told that the texts and the multitude of Bible translations are all uncertain. What a fine foundation to base a life upon, or from which one may view supposed truth about life, death, resurrection, healing, guidance and glorious transcendent examples of morals and truths. For it is the textual critics who supply the data to the translators of the Bible and to the publishers of these translations. Examine any introduction of most Bibles as concerns their creation and history and you will find a den of textual critics behind the scenes. For example a translation may state that it is based upon the

Nestle/Aland Greek New Testament and perhaps, the Stuttgart Hebrew text, yet these very Greek and Hebrew texts are themselves the products of classical textual criticism. What is one to think of the once popular *Amplified New Testament* or the *Amplified Bible*? A scholar (Mrs. Frances E. Siewert) created this translation using over twenty-seven translations, and then based the results upon the Greek text of Westcott-Hort. Her work seems erudite, it may even seem revolutionary, but it is a very poor translation filled with dogmatic assertions about some grammatical slots (achieved with a very [apparently] limited grasp of Koine Greek), endless synonyms and comments about styles or manners attributed to the NT "authors". Readers are actually left with a very narrow and biased view of the text. The *Amplified Bible* is an obvious failure stemming from a mishandling of textual criticism and a naive editor.

What of the more polished texts such as the *New International Version* or Holman's *Christian Standard Bible*? Both claim to be produced by teams of well-meaning Bible scholars and critics, both based upon standard Greek and Hebrew texts. Anyone comparing these translations will instantly see that one (or both) are "playing a game with different rules, not according to Hoyle". When the translations vary, which is to be trusted? Indeed both are financial investments, the goal was/is to generate income for certain publishers and scholars. Textual fidelity is an abstract which they cannot claim, for when one looks under their pretensions, there lies the modern uncertainties associated with current theories of Biblical textual criticism! The very sources of their translations are themselves viewed as approximations of what the New Testament may have originally been, no confidence no certainties!

Not all practitioners of the science are guilty. There are those who are somewhat independent, who practice needed criticism with a clearer purpose and with better and more practical procedures.

An analogy might be seen in an attempt to infuse into the study of crystallography, elements of topological analyzes. This would produce many interesting results and theories (more bubbles) but the union of topology and crystallography would only hinder the simple and stable tenets of crystal-

lography, with its simple system of seven crystal classifications. In other words, the canons, methods and theories of classical textual criticism are inimical to the craft and science of Biblical textual criticism. I repeat—the typical procedures and purposes of most Biblical textual critics, are a hindrance to the establishment and validity of the Biblical text.

Can a better procedure be accepted? Does one exist? Perhaps the following may serve as a starting point for the practice of genuine Biblical Textual Criticism.

## THE PURPOSE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

- to clarify the text
- to validate the text
- to maintain and preserve the text

"To clarify the text", means simply, via textual criticism, the critic produces results which actually clarify passages. That is, the meanings are clear, transmission errors are removed as well as prior religious biases from or via the ancient scribes. This requires an intimate knowledge of the entire Biblical text, all of the contexts, and a mature grasp of all the languages involved, styles of the various human agents involved and solid familiarity with the Greek manuscripts. Clarification also results from the accurate and full display of all of the known variants, which is still a required task. This seems to be a contradiction, but when the range of variations is known, the Holy-Spirit-enabled examiner can make a better decision! The textual variations need to accord to the Author's intent. When this process is utilized in the evaluation of variant readings, an actual elutriation should occur. When prayerfully accomplished, the text and translation should genuinely edify the reader.

"To validate the text", means to prove that it is genuine, that it is the very Words God intended. Only the Holy Spirit can accomplish this. Thus the actual critic MUST have within him/her the indwelling Holy Spirit, and must be living a fairly obedient life. Pagan critics (and the world is full of them) cannot fulfill this essential requirement. As a result they are the first to claim that this is not a rational purpose or method. They will claim that the text is being subjected to a belief system similar to a religion, and not to a science. Indeed! Is not an actual child of God in the best position to recognize and validate the Words of the Father? Bibles are not really meant for pagans, they are God's Word for His people, for His flock. Unbelievers may read the Bible, and manipulate its text, but it is not food for their souls. Following the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit in validating the text and in recognizing which variant reading is valid; is, of course, contrary to most definitions of scientific processes. But we are not dealing with a mere book created by some humans. We are dealing with a very unique book, the very Words God inspired and deigned to have written. Recognizing these Words is one of the many functions of the Holy Spirit. Various classical canons fail here, and human rationalism loses the day.

"To maintain and preserve the text", means to correctly copy it, and to assure it is accurately copied, printed and quoted. It also means to be able to recognize and remove attacks and distortions imposed upon the text. In order for a text to be maintained, it must first exist and be recognized. It should be an acceptable, established and validated text, confirmed by qualified (Spirit filled critics). Minor improvements and variations will naturally occur, and improved translations are a fact of language evolution, but the base text can and should be ardently maintained.

These are the results or purpose of Biblical textual criticism. These three goals should control every aspect of the many processes involved in establishing the Biblical text. Recognition of mature, Spirit-filled critics is accomplished by fellow believers who can testify to the lifestyle, to the

morals, to the behavior, to the humility and to the obedience of the critic under review. Genuine Biblical critics express a God-given gift, a talent. Not all saints and believers can be textual critics.

The science of Biblical textual criticism has for far too long been controlled by humanists; humanists professionally trained to be critics. Trained to ruthless objectiveness, an objectiveness which denies miracles, which denies the true transcendent status of God's written Word. Contrary to the canons of classical textual criticism a shorter text may not be the original reading, at times the original text is apparently conflated. An awkward Greek verb may indeed be the original spelling, even if it is Attic: a later reading may be the original, and all papyri are not closer to the original form of the Bible or New Testament text! Indeed, there is another criterion which supercedes all these classical canons, a criterion which stems from the mysterious. It is the symbiotic relationship of the Holy Spirit working within the bosom of a gifted Biblical textual critic. A mysterious ability which the haughty humanistic textual critics cannot fathom, it is absolutely foreign to them. *It is vain* to even hope that they might (as unrepentant pagans) ever accept the witness of the Holy Spirit. *It is vain* to even expect them to ever acknowledge the results of a believer's efforts in clarifying, or validating the text. Consequently, when believers confront the pagan academics, we should use their terminology, we should prove our efforts within the textual criticism parameters they can understand. A pleasant burden!

Below is a quote from a past textual critic, a man who did produce some useful works. And yes like us all is/was liable to mistakes and imperfections, but then that is our goal—perfection.

The New Testament is more than a book: it is the record of life, of *the life which is life indeed*. And all our study of its words will be in vain, unless they are the means of conducting us to Him Who is the Word. But the more earnestly we devote ourselves to that study with the best aids which modern discovery and research have placed within our reach, and the more loyally we follow the leading of the Spirit who has been sent to guide us into *all the truth*, the more fully we shall recognize with Origen, the first great Bib-

lical critic, that 'there is not one jot or tittle written in Scripture, which does not work its own work for those who know how to use the forces of the words which have been written.'

[George Milligan, *The New Testament Documents: Their Origin and Early History*. London, 1913. Page 80.]

Milligan was an academic, but foremost he is known as a man who submitted to the written Word of God.

Since the Holy Spirit is a NECESSARY component of true Biblical textual criticism, why is it that folks like Tov, Metzger, Aland and Lake omit or never mention this tool?

Perhaps one should answer with another question:

IS THE BIBLE THE WORD OF GOD, OR NOT?

Each so-called Biblical textual critic should be forced to reveal their answer. Each should also be asked if they believe God's written Word to be Holy, uniquely Inspired [II Timothy 3:16,17] and error-free in the originals. These simple questions should be part of a mandated job description questionnaire. Before a person can serve as a peace officer, he is asked if he is a felon, and submits to a background check. Thieves are not usually hired as bank clerks. So why is it that folks who work with the most important documents in the universe, are largely unknown and mysterious as regards their actual perception of the Divine text? It reminds me of therapists who are also pedophiles, therapists who counsel children who are victims of pedophiles! Is it too much to demand for us end users and purchasers of various Bibles to know the qualifications of those who produced or edited the text? Just knowing their academic back-ground only reveals that each has submitted to some type of programming, and that they may be purely humanistic. We need answers to questions that concern their belief system, their personal attitudes towards the Scriptures and God.

What amazes me is the number of textual critics who avoid mentioning their faith in the written Word! Do they assume that readers accept their



myriads of journal articles and academic degrees as proof of their faith in God and His Word? Apparently. Such apparent behavior by these critics seem to mock and belittle the intelligence of devout Christians who may examine their comments about pretty bubbles. I suspect that they hide in silence for a reason. If the prefaces to their contrived exegeses revealed their possible paganism or humanism, they would jeopardize their incomes and status generated by their many sophistic ejaculations.

Am I angry? Yes. I ought to be.

One bold publication, appearing in 1990, exposed the inner workings of academically programmed textual critics. It was written by a "historical critic". One who eventually came to develop a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Dr. Eta Linnemann in her expose declared:

Today I realize that historical-critical theology's monopolistic character and world-wide influence is a sign of God's judgment (Rom. 1:18-32). God predicted this in his Word: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3). He also promised to send "a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie" (2 Thess. 2:11). *God is not dead, nor has he resigned. He reigns, and he is already executing judgment on those who declare him dead or assert that he is a false god who does nothing, either good or evil.*

[Eta Linnemann. *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned evangelical*. Baker Book House, 1990. page 18.]

Dr. Linnemann had achieved much in her academic career. She experienced much typical programming in various German theological universities. She was a professor of theology at Braunschweig Technical University, West Germany. She had published numerous journal articles in prestigious religious journals. But when she met Christ, she could no longer assail the written Word using the learned techniques of the humanists and

pagans. So she "dropped out". Bravo! Currently she continues to serve the Lord, and additionally wrote several revealing books!

Classical textual criticism often labors with texts which may have only a few surviving witnesses. Not so of the Bible, literally thousands upon thousands of manuscripts survive, not just in Greek and Hebrew. Biblical textual criticism does not suffer from a lack of copies, it suffers from the practicing critics' inability to recognize truth, to recognize the Author's intent (a.k.a. as discourse analysis). How does one expect a gopher to write upon the effects of deep sea diving? How does one expect a carpenter to perform routine brain surgeries? How does one expect critics, who lack faith, to examine faith and the very foundation of faith, the written Word?

The genuine textual critic must have a stable theology, not copied from some superior, but a theology learned via personal study, experience, prayer and meditation. A proper Biblical theology is required so that the critic can better detect evil, evil temptations, evil deceptions. Knowing Satan and his goals should alert the critic to unusual manuscript variants affecting a variety of key theological truths. Truths such as the expected return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the reality of sin, the reality of evil, the eternal destinations of the just and unjust, the concept of the Trinity, the power of Jesus' own faith which faith has been given to each believer. These and many more Biblical concepts are under *constant* attack from the very real enemy—Satan and his demons.

Satan hates the Word from God, the written Word, the Scriptures. Why? Below are several passages, illuminating one reason:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

[Hebrews 4:12, NASB]

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.**

[Ephesians 6:13-17, NASB]

The only weapon a Christian possesses is a sword, the only instrument for offensive tactics is the sword. We have prayer, faith and other pieces of armor, for defense; but again the only offensive weapon we have against evil, against Satan and his agents is the sword—the very written Word from God. This weapon, in the hands of a mature saint, terrifies Satan. Even a child can understand why Satan does all and focuses much of his efforts upon removing, sheathing, dulling or abusing this sword. Textual critics are an easy target, as many are totally unsuspecting. Educated pawns in the hands of a grand master.

As Paul the Apostle, said: "we have the mind of Christ", let us rely upon this insight into the Scriptures, upon this attitude towards truth. These attitudes and this Mind are absolutely necessary elements of Biblical textual criticism. These are also features which separates Biblical textual criticism from classical textual criticism (which only deals with documents created entirely by humans).

True Biblical textual critics have a great responsibility, yet as Linne-mann lamented, it seems that the nihilists and academic humanists are having their brief interlude, soon the curtain shall fall.

As for the Bible-believing, Biblical textual critic, may the good Lord Jesus Christ encourage you, may He maintain you, and may your light and efforts bear fruit. Your purpose, as proposed in this essay;

- to clarify the text
- to validate the text
- to maintain and preserve the text

is a noble task and gift indeed.