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Current Trends and Present Tasks in New Testament Textual Criticism

THE discipline of textual criticism with which this essay deals in part is not in our day a favourite department of scholarship: the centre of interest in biblical studies lies in theological topics, and the attention, I presume, of most working ministers is given to the rich sources of sermon material found in the many works on biblical theology which almost daily pour forth rather than to a task which deals so largely with linguistic minutiae, and which, perhaps, from his student days has appeared to be a laborious and pendent exercise. I think this is a true picture, and its truth is applicable even to the realm of the professional scholar.

For my part, I greatly regret this current neglect of textual topics. Textual criticism, if seriously embarked upon, is indeed a lengthy and laborious procedure, and demands certain qualities which can be caricatured as pedantry; but it is nevertheless a matter of the utmost concern to all those concerned with the exposition of scripture. For, whatever the precise formulation which we each give to our belief in scriptural inspiration, most thoughtful Christians, and I venture to think, all Baptists, attribute to the original words of the New Testament as composed by apostles and "apostolic men" a unique value as mediating in some fashion our God's self-revelation in the Incarnation of the Word. Hence the original text is a treasure to be yearned for and prized greatly—yet we cannot be certain today that we have the *ipsissima verba* of the apostles in our printed scriptures. The text behind the Authorised Version is at best a sixth century text: and the work of Westcott and Hort takes us no further than the fourth century. Some trust in the one, and some, thinking themselves more in touch with scholarship, in the other; but neither is in fact in possession of his longed-for autographic text. We must keep on with the search, and leave nothing uninvestigated till certainty be ours. We are nearer today to the original text than our forebears, but there is much still to be done—a colossal volume of work awaits us before our goal be attained.

I shall assume in this paper that we know or can easily get to know the advances made by Hort, and his successors such as Burkitt, Streeter and Lake: and shall seek rather to outline some of the

current trends in N.T. textual criticism, and some tasks that lie to our hands.

The prime task of the textual critic is, as I have said, to establish the original text. Two approaches to this goal can be found in present day textual work—a documentary approach, and an eclectic approach. These are not exclusive but complementary. The first is typified by the 1946 Schweich lectures of Günther Zuntz, "The Text of the Epistles": here the author casts away all previous theoretical distinctions between readings as Neutral, Western and so forth; and bases his approach on "the oldest manuscript," namely, the Chester Beatty Papyrus Codex of the Epistles (p. 46). Earlier studies of this papyrus and its fellows have attempted to classify them as Neutral, or (in the gospels) Caesarean: but these categories, while applicable to the earliest manuscript evidence known to Hort and those who elaborated his work, have been found unsuited to the explanation of the papyrus text which is a full century earlier than the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus. Hence Zuntz rightly emphasises that for a true picture of textual history we must base ourselves on this oldest evidence and work down the stream of history, explaining the later categories and types of text (which are probably the results of recension and editorial work) by the earlier evidence in which readings of various categories appear to mingle inexplicably. This may mean that we begin again 'de novo,' but more significantly that we will be a hundred years or more nearer to the autographs. Every newly discovered early manuscript may mean a readjustment of the picture, but a consequent great certainty in our work. Zuntz has thus made a suggestive contribution to the primary work of the text-critic; and his approach demands an exhaustive study of the numerous fragments on papyrus and vellum which we have today. The harvest from these sources is not likely to be as great as from the Chester Beatty papyri, in so far as they are not so extensive in text: but what we do discover will illuminate the new knowledge drawn from the more important manuscripts. A similar approach can be made for the Gospel text, and for the Apocalypse, though the fact that p. 47 (the Chester Beatty manuscript of the Apocalypse) contains a text no less corrupt than Sinaiticus and other significant witnesses warns us that a hundred years further back is not the whole way.

The second approach—which I have named 'eclectic'—sets out to establish the text from first principles: i.e. without prejudice as to textual types, it judges between readings by means of a number of criteria, estimating such factors as the author's style and use of Greek, the possibility of harmonisation (especially in Synoptic variants), the historical accuracy of variants as illuminated by local conditions. This approach is best outlined in G. D. Kilpatrick's notable articles "Western Text and Original Text in the Gospels

and Acts" and "Western Text and Original Text in the Epistles." Special applications of the method are seen in A. Wensinck's and M. Black's assessment of the worth of the Western Text on the grounds of its reflection of the Aramaic original of our Lord's sayings and of the Gospel tradition: and in the investigations of C. S. C. Williams and K. W. Clark, in recent publications, into the causation of variants which can be traced to theological prejudice or opinion. This method is necessary because, as we have noted at the close of our last paragraph, early though our papyri be, they are evidently not the pure original but display corruptions of varying kinds. In our present situation this type of approach from first principles, utilising our knowledge in every cognate sphere, is necessary and valuable.

These disciplines bear directly upon the recovery of the original text of the New Testament scriptures. There are, however, other trends and tasks in present day textual criticism which are not directly concerned with this search, but trace later developments in the text and later influences upon it. They are not to be ruled out for this reason as without value, for one lesson learnt over the years is that nothing can be judged beforehand to be without significance, for a late Father or a version far removed from the Greek may turn out to be a valuable repository of ancient readings: not only so, but also we need to realise the value of textual criticism as a handmaid, not only of Biblical study, but of Church history too. The tasks I shall indicate are—the establishment of the text of the Diatessaron of Tatian, the investigation of the Byzantine text of the Gospels, and the growing knowledge of the early versions of the New Testament.

The Diatessaron is the name usually given to the harmony of the Gospels, carefully moulded into a mosaic, by the Assyrian Christian of the second century, Tatian. There is some evidence that it went under the name of Diapente in some circles, and from this it has been deduced that a fifth apocryphal gospel was an additional source utilised by Tatian. This is probably true, even if the name Diapente does not bear upon it, but what the source was is at present undecided. It has been considered by some scholars that much textual variation in the Gospels can be traced to the influence of the Diatessaron upon "separated-gospel" texts. This again is capable of over-exaggeration but there is enough truth in it to make the establishment of the original text of the Diatessaron a matter of value to the text-critic. Traces of it in Greek were early lost, since Eusebius in his day could assert that no copies were extant. It was therefore a matter of interest when a small fragment in Greek was discovered during the excavations at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. However, it is in other directions that we must look for the bulk of the work at present. Tatian's work exercised

a powerful spell over his fellow countrymen, and although no remains are found in Syriac, there are numerous evidences of its existence, and secondary translations of it. We rely, in this area, mainly upon an Armenian translation of Ephraem the Syrian's commentary upon the Diatessaron; and upon an Arabic translation of the Diatessaron itself. Oriental Christianity, and oriental heresy such as the religion of the Manichees, was greatly influenced by the Diatessaron, and other remains of it are found in Persian and Coptic, and in the dialects of Turkestan and the Gobi Desert. The linguistic equipment demanded for this side of the work is considerable; in fact a veritable army of polyglot scholars is needed. The interesting hypothesis has recently been advanced that the earliest translation of the Gospels in Armenian was based on a Diatessaron; and similar suggestions have been made regarding the Georgian version. But it was not only the East that heard gladly the Gospel according to Tatian: his work had widespread vogue in the West, and a number of gospel-harmonies in such tongues as Dutch, German, English and Italian (in their medieval forms) have been shown to reproduce the Diatessaron. Amongst these witnesses is a Harmony in Middle-English which was once the possession and favourite reading of the diarist Samuel Pepys: it is now in Magdalene College, Cambridge. We can learn much of second century Christianity and of popular Christianity in East and West for centuries afterwards, from this elusive but not irrecoverable work, which has been called "the earliest life of Christ" and "the first commentary upon the Gospels." In some quarters there is scepticism both concerning the attainability of the original Tatiantext, and concerning its influence on the Syriac and Latin translations. To speak solely for myself, I am convinced of both these theses, though perhaps a greater caution is required than certain continental savants have exercised.

The second task amongst the secondary pursuits of the textual scholar which I shall indicate, is the investigation of the Byzantine text, that is, the text dominant in the later middle ages which, quite by accident, became fixed as the printed standard (though not in a fully representative form) in the various Greek Testaments of the Renaissance. It has become customary since the work of Lachmann and Hort to consider this text derivative and conflate, and in consequence, of little if any value for New Testament textual criticism. However, Hermann von Soden, the great German textual critic and exegete, restored interest in the text by claiming for it equal antiquity with the other great texts of the fourth century (i.e. what we are accustomed to call "Neutral," "Caesarean" and "Western," though this was not v. Soden's nomenclature). Although von Soden's work was on occasions inaccurate in detail, and certain of his hypotheses untenable, he was a pioneer blazing a trail in virgin territory;

and his work has much to teach us. Those few but assiduous scholars who have ventured under his guidance into the realms of the Byzantine text have found that between the fifth and twelfth centuries, the Greek text was, within certain limits, almost as fluid as during the earlier centuries. The investigation of both manuscripts and citations in the fathers have shown a rich diversity, so that it would appear, for example, that Leontius, John of Damascus and Photius, three leading figures in the history of Greek Orthodox Christianity, used quite distinct and different texts. We have now the task to face afresh, to discover when the Byzantine text was formed, what it is, whether many or one, and how it developed: the medieval minuscules have attained a new importance, and the medieval Greek ecclesiastics prove to have been apparently less stereotyped, in text at least, than we have been led to believe. This investigation may eventually prove to bear on the original text in some measure since readings hitherto thought to be late and corrupt appeared in the Chester Beatty papyrus—and so come into focus once more as readings to be considered with care.

Not unconnected with this is the third task I have chosen to write of, the investigation of the various ancient translations or versions of the New Testament: Here we find the living and abiding voice of the early Christian missionaries in a whole babel of fascinating tongues and scripts: the primary versions (that is, those translated directly from the Greek) in Latin, Syriac, and the dialects of Coptic: the secondary versions (translated from a prior translation but often of no less importance for textual matters)—Armenian and Georgian, Arabic, Persian and Ethiopic, Anglo-Saxon and Provençal. By means of these we can trace what kind of manuscripts and what standards of biblical scholarship prevailed in the churches which sponsored the missions and in the infant churches themselves. Sidelights are thrown on church history—we can note, for example, how those churches with vernacular scriptures early translated, flourished, or endured in persecution (the Coptic and the Armenian, for instance) while in North Africa, where neither Punic nor Berber translations were made, but only Latin for the urban population, the church disappeared before the onslaught of Islam, and the country proves today one of the most intransigent fields for evangelism. At present some versions—the Syriac and the Armenian especially—are attracting great attention, but others are practically neglected: the Ethiopic especially is an area difficult to prospect, but may prove a rich mine of many strata. In all these fields a small band of scholars progresses slowly on.

All these tasks, both in regard to the original text and in connection with the numerous tributaries whereby we trace that source are somewhat hampered by the lack of a comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date critical apparatus, listing all variants and naming

their support. This need will one day be met when the International Greek New Testament Project completes its task. This is a loosely co-ordinated effort on the part of many scholars, directed by American and British committees, to provide a complete critical apparatus. The headquarters and master-file is now in Atlanta, Ga. housed in Emory University, under the direction of Dr. Merrill Parvis who, I believe, is a fellow Baptist of ours.

So the tasks go on individually and are co-ordinated in massive schemes. There is much to be done, and few to do it. May I make a plea for more workers in this field? Whereas some tasks are such that only the highly trained polyglot scholars can accomplish them, there are others which the pastor with ability and good training could well do satisfactorily, providing that he allowed himself a long term over which to plan, read and work. Text-critical studies on patristic citations, for instance, prove a means whereby a man's linguistics are kept in trim, his mind kept alert for subtleties (helpful indeed in expository preaching) and his view raised above the duties and difficulties of the local pastorate to the broader vistas of scholarship and of the church in other ages and climes. So the task, as well as being an end in itself, and contributing to the general effort of text-critical scholarship, would reflect its worth in the mental calibre and the pulpit ministry of him whose recreation it had become.

Text-critical studies and the like have been somewhere, I think by Harnack, described as the "dust and grime" of the theologian's workshop: as necessary to the work of God as the polished product of systematics or pastoral toil. It is a high privilege to labour amidst that "dust and grime" rather than in more evidently glorious places. Our Lord has said that heaven and earth shall pass away but His words never: and in similar vein, that no iota nor tittle shall pass from the Law till all be fulfilled. It would appear that the exact establishment of His words and all the scriptural witness to Him is a prime duty of the Church in every generation. May many within the Church continue to turn their hand to this task.

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