

The Chester Beatty Papyri

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What may fairly be claimed as the greatest discovery of Biblical manuscripts since Tischendorf discovered the Codex Sinaiticus in 1844, was announced in "The Times" of November 19th, 1931. A group of papyri, probably from the Fayum district of Egypt, bought from native dealers by Mr. A. Chester Beatty, proved to be portions of twelve distinct manuscripts, of which eight contained parts of the Greek Old Testament, three contained parts of the New Testament, and the remaining one, parts of the Book of Enoch and a Christian Homily. Most of the papyri belonged to the third century. Of the three New Testament portions, one contains thirty leaves of the Gospels and Acts, another ten leaves of the Pauline epistles, the third ten leaves of the Revelation. They are, no doubt, the remains of a copy of the Scriptures possessed by some ancient Christian church or monastery.

The form of the MSS. is interesting; they are not in roll-form but in codex-form, that is, in modern book-form. The old-fashioned papyrus roll was superseded in the fourth century by the vellum codex, and the papyrus codex formed an intermediate link. Apparently it was among Christian communities and for copies of the Scriptures, that the codex-forms first came into vogue, as at the date of the Chester Beatty papyri non-Christian writings were still in the roll-form. Thus as early as the third century the four Gospels or the Pauline epistles could be had together in one volume, which was not practicable in the earlier roll-stage.

The date of the MSS. is significant for another reason. They are assigned for the most part to the third century, and so for the first time we have evidence on a sufficiently large scale for the condition of the New Testament text a century before the age of the two great Uncials, the Vatican and Sinaitic codices. An account of the significance of the find for textual criticism is given by that indefatigable Biblical scholar, Sir Frederic Kenyon, in the British Academy Schweich lectures for 1932, "Recent Developments in the Textual Criticism of the Greek Bible," while the same writer is still in course of studying and publishing in parts the actual text of the papyri.

In these lectures, which are extraordinarily interesting, even apart from their discussion of the Chester Beatty papyri, and which, being in a popular form, should appeal to those who have no claim to specialization along these lines, Dr. Kenyon traces the progress made in the textual study of the Greek Bible, particularly the New Testament, since the publication of the Revised Version, and shows how the papyri appeared just when textual scholars had arrived at the point where exactly this evidence was necessary to check their conclusions.

When the labours of the textual giants' of last century culminated in Westcott and Hort's edition of the Greek Testament and the publication of the Revised Version, three main families of ancient New Testament texts were recognized. There was the "Received Text," represented by

the bulk of later MSS., which underlay the Authorised Version. Then there was the "Neutral Text," as Hort called it, represented by the great uncial MSS. of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Vatican, Sinaitic, and Alexandrine, of which the Vatican was regarded as the purest. Lastly there was a rather indeterminate family of texts, deviating to a marked degree from the other two by additions, omissions, and alterations, chiefly represented by the Codex Bezae (in the Cambridge University Library), the old Latin version (the predecessor of the Vulgate), the old Syriac version, and the bulk of Biblical quotations' in the Christian Fathers of the first three centuries. This was called the "Western Text," since some of its most important representatives belonged to the Western Church. Hort gave his judgment against its claim to represent the original text.

The labours of last century demonstrated the inferiority of the old Received Text. Dr. Kenyon says truly, "No scholar trained in textual criticism would now uphold, or has for many years upheld, the superiority of the Received Text as compared with the earlier witnesses." But when the controversy between the Received Text and the Neutral Text died, a new controversy sprang to birth between the Neutral Text and the Western Text. The researches of many scholars in the earlier part of the present century tended

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to give the Western Text a greater importance than Westcott and Hort had allowed. We cannot go into the whole story here, but since the war a new text-family has been isolated from the mass of Western texts. Canon Streeter of Oxford, in "The Four Gospels" (1924)—an epoch-making book for the study of the Synoptic Problem as well as for textual criticism—demonstrated that a Greek text was in vogue in the third century, roughly midway between the Neutral and Western texts, to which he gave the name "Caesarean," as he located it in Caesarea.

"Henceforward," says Sir Frederic Kenyon, "the Caesarean text has an assured place in textual criticism." Attention was at once concentrated on it, and several scholars have been inclined to recognize in it the true representative of the original text. Chief among those who followed up this line of study was Professor Kirsopp Lake, of Harvard, who showed reason to believe that this Caesarean text may really have had its original home in Egypt. But Egypt was the home of the Neutral Text, and if the Caesarean text was in Egypt a hundred years earlier than our oldest authorities for the Neutral Text, then it was at least possible that the Neutral Text was a later revision of this earlier text.

Naturally, strong evidence was required to place Lake's theory on a sound basis. And just when it was required it came—in the Chester Beatty papyri. Their textual character may be summed up in Kenyon's words: "The papyrus, while not agreeing wholly with any of the main families as otherwise known to us, is definitely Caesarean in Mark, and if we cannot affirm the same positively with regard to the other Gospels, that may be because in them the Caesarean text is less well-known to us." In any case, it is a canon of textual criticism established by Streeter in 1924 that the text of Mark is the touchstone for deciding the pedigree of any Biblical manuscript: There the story rests for the present, but there is still much work to be done in following up these new clues and establishing still more accurately the authentic text of the New Testament Scriptures.

One more point. It may seem that the text of the New Testament is still largely clouded with uncertainty. Such would be an utterly false impression. Any trouble with the New Testament text rises not from scarcity of evidence but from the overwhelming wealth of evidence. No point of Christian faith or practice is affected by these textual questions. Every fresh discovery helps to confirm the general reliability of our New Testament text, and the evidence of the Chester Beatty papyri is no exception to the rule. Here is Dr. Kenyon's verdict, endorsed by no less an authority than Professor Burkitt, of Cambridge: "It shows no marked divergencies of its own from the main tradition, and it contains none of the marked divergencies found in certain of our early witnesses. It is true that it is very imperfect, but it covers such a substantial portion of the Gospels that it is legitimate to draw general conclusions from it; and these show, in the early part of the third century, a text of the Gospels and Acts identical to all essentials with that which we have hitherto known on the evidence of later authorities."

And so for the marvellous preservation of His Word, even as for its original inspiration, we do well to lift up our hearts in, gratitude and praise, and bless the Name of the Lord.

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