

How We Got the Bible

Lesson 6 - The Text of the New Testament and the Significance of Textual Variations

INTRODUCTION

1. Aim: To discuss the problems that we have with the text.
2. The problem of errors in the transmission of the text is something we need to study.
3. We could ask why God did not in some way collect all of the original books of the inspired writers and store them up through the years for safekeeping.
4. Since God did not store the autographs for safekeeping, copies and copies of copies had to be made in order for the spreading of the written word and the replacement of worn out copies
5. Problems persist in the making of books, not exclusively an ancient problem
 - a. The original 1611 KJV was not exempt: over 400 errors in printing corrected in subsequent editions in the first two years
 - b. Even modern translations such as the RSV and the NIV are not exempt
6. Ancient mistakes in hand copying are viewed in a more reasonable light
7. No human hand is so exact or eye so sharp that they could copy the Bible without making some mistakes.

Discussion

I. TEXTUAL CRITICISM

- A. The rise of biblical criticism
 1. Criticism defined: "The scientific investigation of literary documents (as the Bible) in regard to such matters as origin, text, composition, character, or history" (Webster's 7th ed.)
 2. Higher criticism deals with matters of authorship, composition and historical value of a Biblical document
 3. Lower criticism (= textual criticism) deals with the form of words, i.e., the text itself

- B. The function of textual criticism: to recover the exact wording of the autographs
 1. He tried to weed out the chaff of bad readings from the genuine Greek text.
 2. His task is as important as the message in the text.
 3. If the Greek text is faulty, all translations from that manuscript will be at fault.

II. Mistakes of copyists

- A. Unintentional errors: mistakes of the hand, eye or ear are normally easy to recognize and they pose no problem because they are easy to discover.
 1. Mistaking one word for another - and then write down the wrong word
 2. Confusing similar sounding words - like in English "affect" and "effect"
 3. Improper word division
 - a. Romans 5:1 "Let us have peace with God" Or "we have peace with God"
 - b. The difference is whether the "o" is long or short.
 - c. Rev. 1:5 "washed us from our sins" Or "freed us from our sins"
 - d. The difference is one letter and the words sound the same.
 4. Overlooking or underlooking words
 5. Phrases and lines - eye skip from end of line 6 to beginning of line 9
 6. Writing marginal notes into the text
 - a. Sometimes the scribe would write explanatory notes in the margin
 - b. These would at times be copied as a part of the text by the scribe.

- B. Intentional errors: scribes desire to "correct" the text - these present more of a problem
 1. Spelling - it seems to the person that is copying it that the word is misspelled
 2. Grammar - or he may think that the Greek verb does not have the proper ending
 3. Harmonizing - if there is a statement of Jesus in one Gospel that is similar to a statement in another, he might modify one to make it harmonize with the other.
 - a. Matt. 11:19 in the KJV - "But wisdom is justified of her children."
 - b. Matt. 11:19 in the ASV - "And wisdom is justified by her works."
 - c. Luke 7:35 "But wisdom is justified of all her children."
 - d. The oldest manuscripts of Matt. 11:9 have "works" instead of children. The copyist must have compared the writing in Luke and changed this in Matthew.
 4. Historical difficulties
 5. Combining readings

III. Basic rules of textual criticism, the “canons” of criticism

A. Listed

1. The more difficult reading is to be preferred
2. The quality of witnesses is more important than the quantity
 - a. The textual authorities must be weighed rather than counted.
 - b. Thousands of manuscripts and versions may support a certain reading; but if they are of late date and stand opposed to the early uncials, their witness should be rejected.
3. In parallel passages, the different reading is to be preferred, (because scribes tended to harmonize passages)

B. The example of Matthew 11:19: “works” or “children”

1. “Works” is the more difficult reading
2. The older and better manuscripts support “works”
3. “Works” is different from “children” in Luke 7:35
4. See footnote in ESV
 - a. Abbreviations are called “apparatus”
 - b. In NKJV “NU” refers to the Nestle Aland version and the United Bible Societies

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF TEXTUAL VARIATIONS

A. A book of 200,000 “errors”

1. Number arrived at by counting every variance in the more than 5,300 manuscripts
2. Thus, one copyist's mistake which appears in 4,000 manuscripts is counted as “4,000 errors”
3. The textual critics refer to these as “textual variants” or “variations”

B. The abuse and the use

1. The large number of variants in the manuscripts is used to undermine faith in God's word
2. Rather, the large number of manuscripts should be used to sustain faith in God's word because it supplies the means of checking the variants

C. Consequences of variations

1. Trivial variations of no consequence

- a. Minor changes in wording or spelling; cf. sample page for Matthew 11:19 in Nestle-Aland 25th ed. Greek N.T.
- b. The addition or omission of words such as “for,” “and,” and “the”
- c. Whether Jesus spoke of “the one who has ears” or “the one who has ears to hear”
- d. Similar sounding Greek vowels: e and i, ei and i, ai and e
- e. Updated spelling
 - (1) Spelling proper names
 - (2) “Apelles” or “Apollonios” (Acts 18:24)
 - (3) “Bethabara beyond the Jordan” or “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28)
 - (4) “Bethzatha” or “Bethesda” or “Bethsaida” (John 5:2)
- f. Changes in word order: “the birth of Jesus Christ” or “the birth of Christ Jesus” (Matt 1:18)
- g. Note: none of these variations affect the meaning of the text

2. Substantial variations of no consequence

- a. The unique reading in Codex Bezae ©. 5th cent.) in Luke 6:5
 - (1) V. 5 moved to after v. 10
 - (2) Between vv. 4 and 6: addition of “On the same day, seeing one working on the Sabbath day, he said to him, Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.”
- b. The story of the adulterous woman (John 7:53-8:11)
 - (1) Placement in modern translations
 - (2) Bracketed or separated from the rest of the text (ASV, RSV, NAS, NIV, NRSV, ESV)
 - (3) Placed at the end of John's Gospel (NEB, REV)
 - (4) Limited evidence for the passage
 - (5) The earliest Greek manuscript containing the passage is Codex Bezae
 - (6) Some others, from the 8th cent. onward, have the passage after Luke 21:38 (Jesus at the temple), at the end of John's Gospel or otherwise mark the passage

- (7) Seems to have been a tradition handed down from the primitive church
 - (8) Its acceptance is based on the way it vouches for its own truthfulness
- c. The confession of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:37)
- (1) Words footnoted in ASV, RSV and modern versions
 - (2) The earliest supporting Greek manuscript is Codex Laudianus (6th cent.) and a few good minuscules and Old Latin versions along
 - (3) The quote from early church fathers, Irenaeus (late 2nd cent.), Tertullian (early 3rd cent.) and Cyprian (3rd cent.)
 - (4) But practically all the other manuscripts and versions stand opposed to it.
 - (5) Because no Greek manuscript earlier than the sixth century knows of this reading, beyond doubt it could not have formed a part of the original account of Acts.
- d. The Three Heavenly Witnesses (1 John 5:7)
- (1) First Greek manuscript (Ms. 61, early 16th cent.) to contain the text seems to have been produced especially for Erasmus as he prepared the 3rd edition of his Greek N. T.
 - (2) From there it made its way into the KJV
 - (3) First known document containing the passage, a 4th cent. Latin treatise, Liber Apologeticus; from there it gradually became copied as part of the text of 1 John in the Old Latin and Vulgate versions
 - (4) Of all the Greek manuscripts, only two contain it. These two manuscripts are of very late dates, one from the fourteenth or fifteenth century and the other from the sixteenth century.
 - (5) Two other manuscripts have the verse written in the margin.
 - (6) All four manuscripts show evidence that this verse was apparently translated from a late form of the Latin Vulgate.
 - (7) See the note in NKJV

3. Substantial variations affecting the text - Mark 16:9-20 - Long ending
 - a. The primary evidence against the text
 - (1) Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (both 4th cent.)
 - (2) The two oldest uncial manuscripts
 - (3) Though the original scribe for Vaticanus left space for the passage; thus, does Vaticanus actually support Mark 16:9-20?
 - (4) Some earliest copies of the Old Syriac, the Latin Vulgate and others
 - (5) Some scholars argue that Mark's writing style is different than the last twelve verses
 - (6) Some texts have alternate endings after Mark 16:8
 - b. Evidence for the passage
 - (1) How does a "Good News" end with the words, "for they were afraid"?
 - (2) Many other manuscripts include the twelve verses, including other early uncials, late uncials and minuscules, a number of Old Latin and Vulgate versions, the Syriac Peshitta
 - (3) Irenaeus (late 2nd cent.) clearly quotes from the passages and says that Mark is its author
 - (4) The conclusion of J.W. McGarvey, one of the Restoration Movement's greatest scholars: Mark 16:9-20 is authentic, i.e., historically correct, though not genuine, i.e., originally a part of Mark's Gospel
 - c. Some observations
 - (1) Every teaching in Mark 16:9-20 is found elsewhere in the N.T.
 - (2) It seems that the last page of Mark's gospel was accidentally torn away; Mark or some other early Christian supplied the ending we now have

Conclusion

1. What is textual criticism?
2. What are some ways that variations entered into copies of the ancient text?
3. What are some of the rules of textual criticism?
4. How do you explain some 200,000 variations in the manuscripts of the N.T.?
5. What are the questions concerning the ending of Mark's Gospel?

Sources Consulted

1. How We Got The Bible 3rd Edition by Neil R. Lightfoot
 2. Rocky Whitely Oldham Lane church of Christ Abilene, TX
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