


ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE

A magnifying glass with a black handle and a silver rim is positioned over the word 'BIBLE' in the title. The lens of the magnifying glass is centered on the word, making it appear larger and more prominent than the other words in the title.

Book 4:
a journey from then to now

BRIAN H EDWARDS

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from then to now

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In the previous two chapters we introduced the huge amount of material that is available for the early texts of the Bible. Since we have no manuscripts actually written by a prophet or apostle (the autographs), in their search for an accurate text for the Old and New Testaments scholars must sort through the many copies. This is called ‘textual criticism’. It is a detailed and exacting science, and the results take time and patience. What follows here is only a glance at a complex issue. However, the serious reader of the Bible should not be intimidated by the subject.

The text of the Old Testament

Compared with the New Testament, there is far less complexity in discovering the best text for the Old. The main reason for this is that there is considerably less material available. In chapter 2, we surveyed some of the Hebrew manuscripts and versions with which scholars can work. For simplicity, we may define those of significance as: the *Masoretic Text* (Hebrew), the *Septuagint* (Greek), and the *Dead Sea Scrolls* (Hebrew). We have already noted the extreme care of the Masoretes in the ninth century, and they followed a long tradition of such detailed attention for the accurate copying of the sacred texts. For this reason, the *Masoretic Text*, which is the basis for all our English translations, is certainly the best. Few scholars would disagree with this.

However, there are occasions where the translators may not be certain of the meaning of a Hebrew word and here the *Septuagint* may help since it was a translation in the third century BC into Greek from a Hebrew text. In the book of Job, generally considered to be one of the earliest

of our Old Testament books, the translators of the *English Standard Version* admit that there are at least fifteen places (and one whole section in 34:29–33) where the meaning of the Hebrew words is uncertain; when Tyndale was translating Job in the early sixteenth century he was faced with an even larger area of uncertainty because Hebrew was less well-known then. However, we noted earlier that the *Septuagint* is not always reliable and therefore translators will only cautiously use it in preference to the *Masoretic Text*.

The *Septuagint* was not always wrong, and a simple illustration of this is found in the text of Hebrews 11:21. Here, Jacob is said to have blessed Joseph's two sons 'as he leaned on the top of his staff.' Although the writer is not claiming to quote from the Old Testament, in Genesis 47:31 the Hebrew *Masoretic Text* informs us that Jacob 'bowed down at the head of his bed'. We noted in chapter 2 that until the time of the Masoretes (after AD 600), the Hebrew was written without vowels. The Hebrew word for 'bed' has just three consonants in it, MTH, and the Hebrew word for 'staff' has the same three consonants, MTH. Therefore, the Masoretes could have rendered the same word either by 'bed' or 'staff'; the difference meant the addition of the vowel, 'i' or 'a'. The Masoretes chose the word 'bed' and assumed the vowel was 'i', whilst the translators of the *Septuagint*, working long before the Masoretes, chose the word 'staff' and assumed the vowel was 'a'. But which is right? The most straightforward conclusion is that since the word used in Genesis 47 could be either 'bed' or 'staff' the Masoretes made an error of judgement in their choice, and the New Testament writer, directed by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13), gives us the correct translation in Hebrews 11:21. Whilst Genesis 47:31 was inspired by the Spirit (so the consonants are right), the Masoretes were not (therefore the vowels may be wrong).

At other times the *Septuagint* may fill a gap or try to help where the Hebrew is a little obscure. In Genesis 2:2 the Hebrew text literally reads 'On the seventh day God finished the work he had been doing.' Since this seventh day was to be a pattern of rest for Israel, it is obvious to almost all readers that it meant God had finished his work *before* the seventh day. However, some may consider it confusing so, lest there be

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any misunderstanding, the *Septuagint*, the *Samaritan Pentateuch* and the Syriac *Peshitta*, all read ‘On the sixth day God finished his work...’ An unnecessary change.

On the other hand, Genesis 4:8 reads: ‘Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field”’ (*New International Version*). The *Masoretic Text* reads simply: ‘And Cain said to his brother Abel.’ Clearly, something is missing, and some translations render it: ‘And Cain told (or spoke to) Abel his brother’ (The *King James Version*, *Revised Version* and *New American Standard Bible*, *English Standard Version*); however, this involves changing the Hebrew verb. The *Septuagint* translation may have used a Hebrew text that included the words: ‘Let’s go out into the field’ (or it may simply have added them) and therefore some translations, like the NIV, have followed the *Septuagint* here.

Far less helpfully, we noted in chapter 2 a text of the *Septuagint* which apparently added the words ‘*from the tree*’ to Psalm 96:10 to make it a Messianic promise: ‘Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns *from the tree*.”’ Clearly a later addition by an over-zealous Christian copyist.

The accuracy of the work of the Masoretes is illustrated by the agreed fact that their text was clearly the same as that used by Jewish writings and the early church leaders (Origen’s *Hexapla* for example), centuries before the Masoretes began their work—as far back as the second century.⁶⁵ The close agreement with the *Masoretic Text* of both the *Septuagint* and the Dead Sea texts is also witness to the accuracy of the Hebrew Old Testament.

In the previous chapter the significance of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* was outlined. What is particularly important is the fact that the Dead Sea copy of Isaiah is remarkably in line with the earliest *Masoretic Text*. There are differences, but they are few and most are insignificant.⁶⁶ Some

65 Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000), p. 147.

66 We should be aware of those who suggest there are tens of thousands of differences between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text – they are referring to the differences of grammar, spelling, punctuation and the like. These are not errors and rarely change the meaning of the text.

scholars will only allow four occasions where the Dead Sea text of Isaiah is different from and better than the *Masoretic Text*. The differences are overwhelmingly confined to words or even letters. Here is just one typical example: The *Masoretic Text* for Isaiah 40:12 reads, ‘Who has measured the waters [Hebrew *mayim*] in the hollow of his hand?’ whereas the Dead Sea text reads, ‘Who has measured the waters of the sea [Hebrew *mê yam*] in the hollow of his hand?’ Such a scribal difference is easily understood and changes nothing of the meaning.

One Dead Sea text of Isaiah was available in time for the team working on the *Revised Standard Version* in 1952 to make use of it. From the entire scroll, the translation team adopted only thirteen readings from the Dead Sea text in preference to the *Masoretic Text*. One of the leading team members later regretted the adoption of some of these thirteen.

The *New International Version* of 1984 lists no more than sixteen occasions in Isaiah where it sees any need even to note that the Dead Sea text and the *Masoretic Text* differ; on eleven of these occasions the Dead Sea text is preferred, but sometimes only because the Masoretic word is unclear. Here are the first few such notes, the rest are similar in importance: in 7:14 Dead Sea has ‘and he’ or ‘and they’ instead of the Masoretic ‘and’. In 14:4 the translators adopt the Dead Sea, ‘fury’ because the meaning of the Masoretic word is unclear. 15:9 is a matter of spelling a name either *Dimon* (*Masoretic Text*) or *Dibon* (Dead Sea). In 19:18 most Masoretic texts have ‘City of Destruction’ whereas Dead Sea has ‘City of the Sun’. Some of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* of Old Testament books are closer to the *Septuagint* than to the *Masoretic Text*, but even then, the similarities are remarkable and differences are chiefly of the order noted above—occasional words and spelling.

The English Standard Version (2001/8) allows only nine places where the translators preferred the Dead Sea text of Isaiah over the *Masoretic Text* (14:4; 15:9; 21:8; 40:6; 49:12,17,24, 25; 51:19). These variances are all a matter of a word or short phrase or where the meaning of the Hebrew of the *Masoretic Text* is uncertain, as in 14:4. In 15:9 ‘Dibon’ is chosen from the *Dead Sea Scrolls* in preference to ‘Dimon’ in the *Masoretic Text*. In 21:8 ‘then he who saw it cried out’, in preference to ‘then he cried out

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like a lion'. In 40:6 'a voice says', in preference to 'and someone says'. In 49:12 'Syene', in preference to 'Sinim'. In 49:17 'you builders make haste', in preference to 'your children make haste'. In 49:24,25, 'captives of a tyrant', in place of 'captives of a righteous man'. In 51:19 'who will comfort you', in place of 'how shall I comfort you?' This amounts to nine small changes in nine verses out of 1,286 verses in our English Bible of Isaiah. This does not mean these are the only differences between the two, but the only occasion when the translators considered the *Dead Sea Scrolls* offered a better reading. In addition, they noted five occasions where they chose to ignore the Dead Sea variant and six where they chose to ignore the *Septuagint* variant.

It is therefore evident that the Hebrew text underlying the Old Testament has a long history of accurate copying and that where there are differences between various Greek and Hebrew texts, they are mostly confined to words or phrases which make little, if any, difference to the meaning of the Scripture.

The widespread use of the *Septuagint* by the writers of the New Testament letters has been discussed also in Book 2 chapter 4 in this series under, 'How the apostles "quoted" from the Old Testament'.

The text of the New Testament

From all that we have seen in the previous chapter, it is evident that copies of the New Testament books were circulating among the churches before the close of the first century. To take just one example, Clement of Rome wrote to the church at Corinth around AD 95 and invited them:

'Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you...'⁶⁷

Clement could assume that the church at Corinth still held a copy of Paul's letters to them.

⁶⁷ 1 Clement 47.

Evidently, the churches were eager to obtain and copy the books that were from apostolic authorship. Naturally copies meant that occasional mistakes crept in. However, we should remind ourselves that B F Westcott, whose skill as a New Testament textual critic is still recognised after one hundred and fifty years, claimed that ‘substantial variation’ between the texts can hardly form more than a ‘thousandth part’ of the whole New Testament,⁶⁸ and the acclaimed biblical scholar F F Bruce concluded, ‘There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.’⁶⁹

Because there is so much material available for our New Testament text, and because there are some differences between them, it is the task of the textual critic, to discover the best text. In 1796 Johann Jakob Griesbach, Professor of New Testament at the University of Jena in Germany, set out fifteen ‘rules’ for deciding on the best text. He also classified the available New Testament documents into three ‘families’, and this is generally followed today. See the previous chapter for the texts referred to below; these are the main representatives of each group:

First, those that come from the Byzantine (Syrian) Empire, the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, which was based upon Constantinople and lasted from the fourth century and continued with steadily declining power until 1453 when the Turks captured that city. This includes the *Majority Text*.

Second, those that reflect a Western origin with Rome as the centre. This includes *Bezae*.

Third, those that reflect an Eastern source, with Alexandria as the centre. *Sinaiticus*, *Vaticanus*, *Ephraemi*.

However, the division is not as neat and simple as this implies.

Griesbach was the first scholar seriously to challenge the Byzantine text (see the *Received Text* below) as the only permitted text for New

68 Westcott, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, p. 2.

69 F F Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Pickering & Inglis, London 1950), p. 170.

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Testament translation. His first edition of the text was published in 1775 and he was followed shortly after by another German scholar, Karl Lachmann. However, Lachmann did not propose a definitive Greek text because he limited himself to Greek texts and versions and the writing of the church Fathers to the end of the fourth century. To search for an original text from the references to Scripture in the writing of the early church Fathers would be somewhat like attempting to identify a particular translation from the free quotations and paraphrases of a selection of modern preachers. However, as we will see, it was Tischendorf who later brought the subject into a modern focus.

It is the task of the textual critic to compare the various ‘families’ or groups of texts to discover the best reading wherever there may be a difference among available texts.

Since the first edition of Erasmus in 1516 and Estienne’s *Received Text* in 1550, there have been any number of attempts to compile a definitive text of the Greek New Testament with which everyone would agree.⁷⁰ In order to simplify the problem we can divide the approach into the three groups.

THE RECEIVED TEXT

It is the conviction of many Christians that since God gave a verbally infallible Scripture, he must have protected a pure Greek text upon which the church could later base all translations. There is no clear biblical argument in favour of this view since the Scripture insistence on its own revelation from God refers to the autographs; future copies and translations were not in focus. Therefore, we should beware of making this view a matter of essential belief.

This text is known as the *Received Text* or *Textus Receptus*. (See the previous chapter under, The New Testament manuscripts.) This title was not used until 1633, but it did refer to a Greek text that had become standard for all translations across Europe and was basically the text of

⁷⁰ For a detailed discussion of the history of the New Testament text see Bruce M Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (OUP, New York and Oxford 1992). Metzger, like all scholars, was not wholly unbiased in his preferences.

Stephanus (Estienne) of 1550 which was close to Erasmus' final edition in 1527. Bishop Ellicott, the chairman of the committee that produced the Greek text for the *Revised Version*, commented, 'The manuscripts which Erasmus used differ, for the most part, only in small and insignificant details from the great bulk of the cursive manuscripts.⁷¹ The general character of their text is the same.' Ellicott continued that the ancestors of the texts used for the *Received Text* must go back as far as, possibly much further than, any of our existing texts. This is a good recommendation and there is no reason why we should not treat the *Received Text* with great respect.

The *Received Text* comes from the Byzantine (Syrian) family of texts. It is sometimes referred to as the *Majority Text* because more than eighty per cent of our Greek texts belong to it. There are minor differences between these texts but their overwhelming agreement is significant. However, since these texts are dated to the ninth century, and some believe they all come from a fourth century revision by Lucianus, it is assumed they are all copies from the same early text and therefore their value is not decided merely by counting the numbers. Although the idea of a revision by Lucianus is a theory with no factual support, the *Majority Text* is clearly a copy of much earlier texts. From the fact that the majority of our Greek texts come from this family it can be argued that it was the most widely used text for the New Testament among the early churches.

There are some difficulties in accepting the *Received Text* as the only text from which we should work. First, Estienne's text of 1550 was not the only text to be called the *Received Text*. In fact, it was a text of two Dutch brothers by the name of Elzevir that first called itself *Textum Receptum*, but this edition was not published until 1633 and therefore was too late for the translators of the *King James Version* who had completed their work by 1611. There were many New Testament Greek texts produced between 1516 and 1524, all with minor differences and each using more Greek manuscripts than the one before it. Any one of them could have

71 Cursive writing was the Greek joined-up form of writing developed in the first century AD. See the previous chapter under, New Testament manuscripts.

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been chosen as the *Received Text*. Besides this, in places (for example, Acts 8:37; 1 John 5:7–8; Revelation 22:16–21) the text produced by Erasmus does not follow any Byzantine Text, but the Latin *Vulgate*.

The second problem is that a few complete texts of the Greek New Testament, such as *Sinaiticus*, *Vaticanus* and *Alexandrinus* which are dated to the fourth century, and thousands of fragments even older than these and none of which were known to Erasmus have come to light since 1550. What are we to do with them? To ignore them all would seem both unscholarly and against reason; to claim that they have been preserved for so long because they were unreliable and therefore unused is an argument that could dispense with all the *Dead Sea Scrolls* also. We can hardly claim that God preserved these other texts in order to test our faith in the *Received Text*. So, why do we have them if we should not use them?

A third problem with the *Received Text*, is that there are some very definite weaknesses in Estienne's text. When Erasmus' Greek texts ended at Revelation 22:16 he simply retranslated the Latin *Vulgate* back to Greek. In Revelation 22:19 Erasmus, using the *Vulgate*, translated into Greek 'God will take away from him his share in the book of life.' All Greek manuscripts available today read 'tree of life'—the reading we would expect from the context. One scholar in his detailed defence of the *Received Text* claims of this: 'Here he (Erasmus) may have been guided providentially by the common faith to follow the Latin *Vulgate*.'⁷² In reality it would appear that Erasmus was translating from a Latin text in which a careless scribe had read the correct word *ligno* ('tree') as *libro* ('book'). This one word change is not of great importance, but it does reveal a problem in suggesting that the *Received Text* is a perfect Greek text.

Possibly of more significance is the question of 1 John 5:7 'For there are three who bear witness in heaven: The Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.' This is known as the *Comma Johanneum*. Erasmus found it in the Latin *Vulgate*, but in no Greek manuscript; he therefore omitted it from his Greek text in 1516. The outcry was so

72 E F Hills, *The King James Version Defended*. On-line download, p.161. Also available from Christian Research Press (1997).

great that he declared if one Greek manuscript could be produced which included this verse, he too would include it. Conveniently, a manuscript was produced, and in his 3rd edition in 1522, Erasmus placed it in his text but with a note declaring his suspicion that it had been written for the occasion. That single manuscript is now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin and is widely believed to have been written around the year 1520.⁷³ We cannot attribute its presence to Jerome since the earliest evidence of it is in a Latin *Vulgate* of AD 800—four centuries after Jerome.

There is some possible evidence for the early appearance of 1 John 5:7 because Cyprian of Carthage may have alluded to this text around the year AD 250. However, it is more likely to have been an early Christian statement of Trinitarian belief that eventually found its way into the Latin texts. The only defence for its presence in the *Received Text* is the suggestion that it, ‘Somehow dropped out of the Greek New Testament but was preserved in the Latin text through the usage of the Latin speaking church,’⁷⁴ and that this verse is therefore ‘possibly genuine’.⁷⁵ No adequate explanation can be offered as to why such an important statement would ‘drop out’ of the Greek text, and ‘possibly genuine’ does not bring us to certainty. The opinion of Martin Luther is well known when he offered two hundred florins to anyone who could produce just one Greek text with it in adding, with his florins in mind, ‘God alone knows where I will find them.’

What is undisputed, however, is that this particular verse has never been part of the *Majority Text* even though it was added later to the *Received Text*. To accept 1 John 5:7 is to accept the later *Received Text* of 1522 and ignore the *Majority Text*. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity does not depend upon this single verse.

Two other passages, that are found in the *Received Text* although not in many Greek manuscripts discovered more recently—Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53 to 8:11—will be discussed later in this chapter.

73 For example, C H Turner, *The Early Printed Editions of the Greek New Testament* (OUP, Oxford 1924), pp. 23–24. Referenced in Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 101.

74 E F Hills, above, p. 169.

75 E F Hills, above, p. 167.

THE TEXT OF WESTCOTT AND HORT

Griesbach was the first to move away from the *Received Text* when he felt the evidence pointed favourably in the direction of a variant text. Others soon followed. In 1831 Karl Lachmann published a Greek text in which he abandoned all the minuscules that lay behind the *Received Text* and struck out on his own. But it was Tischendorf, who had discovered the codex *Sinaiticus* (see the previous chapter), who laid a foundation for all to follow. Understandably he considered *Sinaiticus* as the most reliable of all texts, and this put him in direct conflict with the *Received Text*. Samuel Tregelles followed with a meticulous study of all available material and by 1872 produced a Greek Text which was published after his death in 1879. He was little concerned with the *Received Text* although his sole purpose was that his text would be ‘for the service of God by serving his church.’

In 1881 the two New Testament scholars from Cambridge, Brooke Fosse Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, put forward a text based almost entirely upon *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*. They assumed, among much else, that because these two texts were much older than the Byzantine texts behind the *Received Text*, they should have precedence. Their preference was for *Vaticanus*. They also made use of the available versions and the writing of the early church leaders to ascertain what they considered the most authentic text. Westcott and Hort were critical, but not wholly dismissive, of the *Received Text*. This was almost universally adopted for many years and few dared to disagree with it for fear of not being considered scholarly. Even the conservative A T Robertson,⁷⁶ and the staunch defender of biblical inerrancy, Benjamin B Warfield, followed the Westcott and Hort approach.

It should be noted that the ten to twenty percent of texts outside the *Majority Text* family do not all agree with each other, and the fact that *Sinaiticus* and others are older than the *Received Text* does not necessarily make them more accurate.

76 A T Robertson, *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Sunday School Board of the Southern Convention, New York, 1925): ‘It is worthwhile to explain precisely what the *Textus Receptus* is so that students may know at the very outset why it cannot now be followed’, p. 17. Although he did concede that the *Textus Receptus* was ‘substantially correct.’

The position of Westcott and Hort was vigorously attacked by John Burgon, Dean of Chichester, who considered *Sinaiticus*, *Vaticanus* and *Bezae*: ‘three of the most scandalously corrupt copies extant’,⁷⁷ but he was almost alone. Other scholars, like Scrivener and Salmon, pointed out that whilst Westcott and Hort had made a valuable contribution, they were quite wrong to disregard the Byzantine (*Received Text*) and Western texts to the extent they did.

Some have tried to accuse *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus* of coming from the pen of scribes seeking to deny the full deity of Christ, but this is wholly unjustified, not least because if it is true, those scribes made a strange blunder at John 1:18. Here *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus* both speak of Christ as ‘the only begotten God’, whereas the *Received Text* has merely ‘the only begotten Son’. The difference is between *theos* and *uios* in the Greek; an illustration of how possible it is for a scribe to make a slight, but significant, mistake.

The *Revised Version* of 1881 was the first translation to adopt the Westcott and Hort text for the New Testament translation as it was found in Alexander Souter’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

THE ‘ECLECTIC’ TEXT

Many have preferred to avoid the rigid boundaries of accepting only the *Received Text* or that of Westcott and Hort, and they steer a middle course following evangelical scholars both of the past and the present. Godly textual scholarship should not be opposed in its attempt to find the best text resulting from the evaluation of everything that is available. This is called an ‘eclectic’ text, that is, using all sources. A preference for the *Received Text* would therefore not prevent using the evidence of other valuable texts.

This is not the place to enter the detailed debate concerning the rigorous ‘rules’ that govern the science of textual criticism. It is by far the most complex of all the biblical sciences. But sufficient to say that there are well established procedures that are used for discussing the

⁷⁷ J W Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (London. 1883), p. 16.

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texts of any piece of literature from Homer to Shakespeare. Nor is it a new science. Early in the third century Origen compiled his *Hexapla*, a presentation of the Old Testament Hebrew and Greek texts in six columns, and this was studied by scholars well into the seventh century until it was destroyed by the forces of Islam in the general pillage of the great libraries of the east.

For centuries, the Roman Catholic hierarchy would allow only the Latin *Vulgate* to be used and was convinced that it was the only reliable and accurate text. Strictly this is still the position of Rome, and any translation has to be based upon the Latin *Vulgate*. We should be cautious about giving any one text an infallibility above all others. More texts are available to us today than were available even to Westcott and Hort.

Examples of Textual criticism

MARK 16:9–20

In the pursuit of the best text, possibly no other passage in the New Testament has received such close attention as this one. Many monographs have been published and at least one doctorate has been earned by grappling with it. The evidence, briefly stated, is that these twelve verses are not found in our two oldest Greek codices, *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*, nor in some of the versions (early translations); in addition, some have discovered in these verses seventeen words that either Mark uses nowhere else or are used here in a different sense.

On the other hand, the verses are included in all the other Greek manuscripts, in all the early Latin manuscripts except one, and are quoted as Scripture by many early church leaders who lived even before *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus* were copied. It is found in Justin Martyr (c. 165), Tatian (c. 170), Irenaeus (c. 202) and Hippolytus (c. 235). Having said this, Jerome (c. 419) when he was preparing the Latin *Vulgate* stated: ‘Almost all the Greek copies [available to him] do not have this concluding portion.’

Whether or not the evidence is in favour of keeping Mark 16:9–20 where it is, at the end of Mark’s Gospel, one thing is certain: it is not a matter of

indifference whether these verses are part of Scripture; it is essential that we have good reasons either to keep them in or to leave them out. Some translations will add a note to this passage that it is not found in ‘The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses’ (NIV 1984). The claim ‘most reliable manuscripts’ is a judgement that not all scholars would agree with. The ESV (2001) notes, ‘Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include...’ which is fair and accurate.

JOHN 7:53 TO 8:11

Unlike the above passage in Mark this section, known as the *pericope adulterae*, is not referred to by most of the early church leaders. It is not found in the texts of *Sinaiticus*, *Alexandrinus* and *Vaticanus* nor in many of the older versions (translations). A few texts even place it after John 21:25 or after Luke 21.

On the other side of the debate, in the fourth century, Eusebius commented that Papias (martyred in AD 135) expounded from it.⁷⁸ So it was evidently known in the second century. Augustine claimed that some removed it from their texts for fear that it would give women an excuse for their immoral behaviour.⁷⁹ He was therefore familiar with it in the late fourth century.

It is certainly in the *Majority Text* and in the *Vulgate* of Jerome. It is also found in some early versions, including a sixth century Syriac, an Egyptian (Coptic), and an Ethiopic version, and *Codex Bezae*.

We may add that the passage fits well into the context of John’s Gospel at this point (though some dispute this) and, more especially, it has all the hallmarks of an eyewitness account as the literary scholar C S Lewis observed.⁸⁰ There is no reason for such an account to have been ‘invented’, and a persuasive argument can be made to support the suggestion that it was deliberately left out of the Eastern texts because of Jesus’ mild rebuke to the woman.

78 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3.39:17. Eusebius claims that he found it in the ‘Gospel according to the Hebrews.’ This ‘Gospel’ has not survived.

79 Augustine, *De adulterinis conjugis*, ll: vii.

80 C S Lewis, Essay: *What are we to make of Jesus Christ?* 1950.

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Of all passages in the New Testament, this is one of the most contentious.⁸¹

1 TIMOTHY 3:16

In contrast to a discussion of a lengthy passage, we can turn to one where a single word is in dispute.

In the *New International Version* (1984), part of 1 Timothy 3:16 reads: 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body...' A footnote adds, 'Some manuscripts read God' in place of 'he'. What the translators do not tell us is that three hundred Greek manuscripts read 'God', six read 'who', two read 'he', and one reads 'which'! Many translations have 'he' because the translators believe that *Codex Sinaiticus* and the other manuscripts and versions where this word is found have the best reading at this point. The *English Standard Version* (2001) follows this also.

However, the fact that some later corrections to *Sinaiticus* have the word 'God', as do most later Greek manuscripts and a number of versions, means that there is a strong case to be made for the word 'God'. Why the difference? Since the words 'who', 'he' and 'which' are quite similar in the Greek (even more so when, as is the case here, abbreviations are used), a scribe might well have confused them. 'God' is a very distinct word and likely, therefore, to be the original. But some think the scribe may have allowed his eye to wander to the verse he had just written (v. 15), where the word 'God' appears twice, and he mistakenly copied it in at verse 16 also. Alternatively a helpful scribe might even have changed 'he' to 'God' in order to make it clear who 'he' is!

A judgement has to be made on which evidence we believe is best, but most readers do not have the skill for this and have to rely on the translators. Fortunately, not many passages are up for discussion in this way, as we have already noted; and even this one in 1 Timothy 3:16

81 For a brief defence of its authenticity see William Hendriksen (1954), *Gospel of John* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1976), Ch.8. For a more detailed discussion of the subject against its inclusion, with all the texts listed, see Philip W Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Illinois, 2008), pp.285–288.

does not affect our theology. If the word is ‘God’ then clearly we have evidence that Christ who ‘appeared in a body’ was God. If the word is ‘he’ then it can only refer to the ‘living God’ who is referred to in the previous verse and who we are now told ‘appeared in a body’. If there was a helpful scribe trying to make it clear that ‘he’ refers to God, he need not have bothered since there is no other way to understand the passage.

ACTS 6:8

The *Majority Text* here reads ‘Stephen, a man full of God’s faith (*pisteos*) and power’ whereas the Eastern family of texts, including *Sinaiticus*, *Alexandrinus*, *Vaticanus* and *Bezae* all read ‘grace (*charitos*) and power’. The two words are not easy to confuse, so why the difference? It is possible that a scribe was influenced by the reference in verse 5 to Stephen ‘full of *faith*’ and inadvertently wrote that instead of ‘grace’.

REVELATION 1:5,6

In the sentence: ‘To him who *loves* us and has *freed* us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a *kingdom* and priests to serve his God and Father’, there are three small textual variations highlighted here by the words in italics. The first concerns the word *loves*. Some Greek texts have the past tense ‘loved’, whilst others have the present tense ‘loves’. There is, of course, no difference in substantial meaning, for if he loved us then he still loves, and if he loves, it is only because he first loved us. The difference is between the *Received Text*—*agapomen* (loved) and the text of *Sinaiticus*—*agaponti* (loves).

The second variation is between the *Received Text*—*lousanti* (washed) and *Sinaiticus*—*lusanti* (freed), a single letter changes the meaning of the word. But both truths are well established elsewhere in Scripture.

The third is the difference between *basileis* (kings) and *basileian* (kingdom), again a small change in two letters, but no clash of meaning. It may be thought that ‘kings’ is better since it precedes the noun ‘priests’; the opposite view would be that ‘kingdom’ is not what we would expect and therefore it is less likely that a copyist would make a mistake.

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1 JOHN 1:4

Here we have the difference between ‘our joy’ and ‘your joy’. The difference in the Greek is as close as it is in the English—just one letter. A scribe copying from dictation might hear it incorrectly or, in the afternoon weariness of a hard day scribing, his hand might inadvertently pen the wrong word. The difference is minimal. This is the level of the great majority of textual issues in the New Testament. The availability of so many texts generally enables the scholar to determine what the true text ought to be.

JOHN 3:16

The variation in some translations: ‘his only Son’ or ‘his only begotten Son’ is not a textual matter at all. All Greek texts read the same here. It is a question of whether the Greek word *monogenes* means simply ‘one and only’ or ‘only begotten’. The consensus of scholars limits its use to ‘one and only’.⁸² Nothing is affected by the differences since the New Testament is clear that the Father has only one Son and that he was begotten through the virgin Mary.

CONCLUSION

These short exercises are what is meant by ‘textual criticism’. Often the context will help us decide the best text to follow. We may be assured that although textual criticism, and the assessment of the material available, is a complex and highly academic task, all but a tiny fraction of the New Testament is unquestioned on any ground, and no doctrine or historical fact hangs upon a disputed passage. It is not generally appreciated that all the main doctrinal passages of the New Testament are entirely free from any textual problem. It may appear alarming to be told that a twentieth century edition of the Greek text designed for translators contains 1,440 variant readings ‘chosen especially in view of their exegetical significance’,⁸³ but it was Westcott himself who unhesitatingly declared

82 See for example Arndt and Gingrich (trans. Walter Bauer), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1979); and Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (1930).

83 Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (OUP, Oxford 1992), third ed. p. 146.

that all the differences did not amount to more than a ‘thousandth part’ of the whole New Testament. A significant proportion of the variants are limited to a single word. There are almost 8,000 verses in the Greek New Testament made up of over 138,000 words.

The New Testament is unique for the amount of ancient material available, and no one can doubt that in all but a few areas we can be certain of the words of the original text. However, we must not underestimate the significance of any passage in which equally valuable manuscripts differ. The doctrine of verbal inspiration can never allow us to call any difference ‘insignificant’, even if it is only a dispute over ‘your’ or ‘our’, ‘he’ or ‘who’. But what is equally true is that we may safely turn to our Greek New Testament and be sure that it reflects accurately in verbal form the mind of God. Where there are difficulties we must with honesty admit our limited knowledge at that point. The problems of textual criticism need never cause us to turn aside from a belief in verbal and plenary inspiration.

More recently, Bruce Metzger, a cautious scholar of the New Testament text, after outlining some of the inevitable errors that do creep in after centuries of copying, added this important caveat: ‘Lest the foregoing examples of alterations should give the impression that scribes were altogether wilful and capricious in transmitting ancient copies of the New Testament, it ought to be noted that other evidence points to the careful and painstaking work on the part of many faithful copyists. There are, for example, instances of difficult readings which have been transmitted with scrupulous fidelity.’⁸⁴ He then provides a few examples where an obvious grammatical blunder has been faithfully transcribed by a copyist who would not dare to change the text in front of him and concludes: ‘These examples of dogged fidelity on the part of scribes could be multiplied.’

Much earlier, Sir Frederick Kenyon, Director of the British Museum for twenty-one years, expressed his own confidence in the Bible text like this: ‘The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say

⁸⁴ Bruce Metzger, above, p. 206.

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without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries.’⁸⁵

All the evidence that has come to light since Sir Frederick Kenyon wrote that reinforces the claim.

⁸⁵ F Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London 1895), p. 55.