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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

SAMUEL PRIDEAUX TREGELLES: HIS LIFE AND LETTERS

I. LIFE AND WORK

MANY well-qualified students do not hesitate to claim that Dr. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles was in fact the greatest Biblical scholar of the nineteenth century. He was born at Wodehouse Place, Falmouth, on 30th January 1813. His father, Samuel Tregelles, was a merchant and related to the Foxes; his mother was a Prideaux. His early training among the Tregelles, Prideaux and Foxe families was in the Society of Friends; he did not, however, become one himself. In the early days of the Brethren movement he was in some matters associated, but did not identify himself with them. In the later years of his life he worshipped with Presbyterians,¹ but it may be said of him that he was one of those who are best described as "Christians unattached".

From his early childhood he was remarkable for a retentive memory. At the age of twelve he entered Falmouth Classical School, where he remained for three years. It is surprising to find that Tregelles, who had shown a definite inclination to academic study, was employed for six years, from 1828 to 1834, at the Neath Abbey Iron Works in Wales. Possibly his practical-minded father distrusted youthful enthusiasm and thought it well for him to learn something of the hard reality of life.

As a young man, Tregelles was drifting from Christian teaching. Christendom's misapplication of the Scriptures of the Prophets and the Psalms utterly failed to satisfy his keen sense of proportion. His intelligence recoiled against the glosses, traditions, explanations and interpretations of the spiritualising schools and would have driven him to the verge of infidelity. But it pleased the Lord to draw his attention to prophetic truth

[¹ That Tregelles became a Presbyterian after his dissociation from the Plymouth meeting of Brethren is also stated by E. C. Marchant in his article on Tregelles in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. F. H. A. Scrivener, however, says that "his last years were more happily spent as a humble lay member of the Church of England, a fact he very earnestly begged me to keep in mind"; and adds in a footnote: "He gave the same assurance to A. Earle, D.D., Bishop of Marlborough, assigning as his reason the results of the study of the Greek New Testament" (*Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the N.T.*, 4th edn., 1894, vol. ii, p. 241). This conflict of evidence suggests that Mr. Fromow is fairly near the mark in using the epithet "unattached" ! ED.]

through a tract on that subject which changed his whole outlook on religion and life; indeed, God used it as a means which wrought the vital change of his regeneration. What a student he became! What a scholar! What books and translations of the ancient languages and Bible manuscripts! Henceforth his friend B. W. Newton became his helper spiritually, and in his publications, financially.

After conversion, the iron works could not hold him; he was led forward into the plan of his life work. His ambition was not less than that of an authoritative Greek Text of the New Testament.

He returned to Falmouth, where he spent two years as a private tutor. At the age of twenty-five he announced his proposals:

(1) For the formation of a text of the Scriptures on the authority of ancient copies, without allowing "the received text" any prescriptive right.

(2) To give to the ancient versions a determining voice as to the insertion or non-insertion of clauses, letting the order of the words rest wholly upon the MSS.

(3) To give the authorities to the text clearly and accurately, so that the reader might at once see what rests upon ancient evidence.

In order that he might himself collate the ancient Uncial MSS (i.e. the earliest written in capitals) he went abroad in October 1845. He spent five months in Rome studying, under great difficulty, the famous Vatican Codex. He was not allowed to transcribe any part, but it is said that he made an occasional note on his finger-nails.

At other great libraries he received every facility—at the Augustinian Monastery in Rome, at Florence, Modena, Venice, Munich, Basle, Paris, and many other places. The great work of the Greek New Testament was not completed until 1872, when he was an old man, stricken in health. His work, however, remains still in publication—one of the great classics.

By 1850 his writings had become known all over the world, and his ripe scholarship was acknowledged in Europe and America. At the age of thirty-seven the University of St. Andrews conferred on him the honorary degree of LL.D. Many works came from his pen. For the student he prepared *Heads of Hebrew*

Grammar, and also *Hebrew Reading Lessons*. He wrote many works dealing with the prophetic books of the Bible. C. H. Spurgeon said of him: "Tregelles is deservedly regarded as a great authority upon prophetic subjects." Many of these books are still in circulation and obtainable, notably his *Remarks on the Prophetic Visions in the Book of Daniel*; his *The Revelation: A New Translation*; his *Historic Evidence of the Authorship and Transmission of the Books of the New Testament*; and *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming: How is it taught in Scripture? and why?*¹ His health prevented him from serving on the Revised Version Committee; he had been invited as a matter of course, but his refusal was inevitable. In 1862, on Lord Palmerston's recommendation, he was granted a Civil List Pension of £100 and in Mr. Gladstone's administration this was supplemented in 1870 by a further £100. His portrait in oil, by Lane, was placed in the Polytechnic Hall in Falmouth. He died in Plymouth on 24th April 1875 and was buried in Plymouth Cemetery. J. Brooking Rowe in a memoir said of him that "he was able to shed a light upon any topic that might be introduced; it was dangerous to ask him a question; doing so was like reaching to take a book and having the whole shelf-full precipitated upon your head". In theology he devoutly upheld the Reformed Faith in all its Free Grace implications, and in prophetic teaching he was a pre-millennialist of simple futurist convictions.

The *Dictionary of National Biography* gives a copious review of his life-story of literary and linguistic accomplishments (Vol. 57 [1899], pp. 170 f.).

II. GREEK TESTAMENT

Messrs. Bagsters, the publishers, said: Dr. Tregelles' Greek New Testament is an endeavour "to give the text of the New Testament on the authority of the ancient witnesses—namely MSS. and versions with the aid of the earlier citations—so as to present as far as possible the text best tested in the earlier centuries". The object of Dr. Tregelles, therefore, was not to edit a text critically corrected, but a text resting on the direct evidence of ancient documents actually existing. He knew that there are some blemishes which the documentary evidence now

¹ We may also mention his English edition of Gesenius's *Hebrew-English Lexicon to the O.T.*, which has just been reprinted by Eerdmans of Grand Rapids, and his very valuable *Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament* (1854). ED.]

possessed does not enable us to remove, and he steadfastly refused to alter anything by conjecture.

Whether that reading he found to be the oldest is difficult to translate or not, or to understand or not, was not his business. Every word in the text he edited was to rest on the distinct witness of antiquity uninfluenced by any subjective considerations in his own mind. Other scholars in later days might through God's mercy to His church be enabled to translate and explain it, or else perhaps to discover another reading in MSS. of superior authority; but his aim in this volume was to reproduce faithfully and rigidly the most ancient texts that he could discern.

It is to be noted that in his work all the ancient evidence *against* the readings which Dr. Tregelles thought the oldest is stated as fully as the evidence in their favour.

The especial feature and chief commendation of this edition is its rigid adherence to the hard facts of *evidence* respecting the ancient text of the Scripture. Experts in manuscript examination will differ upon details, upon the value of the evidence in particular cases, but the skill, diligence and honesty of Dr. Tregelles as one of the chiefs of such experts are admitted by all. The line he marked out for himself in this work gives it, therefore, a permanent value. Other editors have pursued other methods, either with more brilliance and ingenuity or with more apparent authority than the humble design of Tregelles afforded. Some have gathered those readings which the Church's authority has accredited, preferring them to those of mere antiquity. A second school gives forth only those readings which can best be *explained*, and an ancient reading which yields nothing for present-day exposition is rejected. A third group of editors have with great ingenuity and scholarship constructed a *genealogy* of manuscripts and readings, and are guided much by their scheme—the truth of which is still to be proven. A fourth (Tischendorf) was so *arbitrary* that each successive edition of his work disturbed his previous texts surprisingly. "The sum of textual variations between his third and seventh editions amounted to 1,296. The eighth edition differs from the seventh by as many as 3,369 places."¹

Further indication of the quality of Dr. Tregelles's edition

[¹ Tischendorf's eighth edition (1864-72) is, however, so free from arbitrariness that for purposes of textual study it remains the definitive edition of the Greek New Testament. And as J. N. Sanders says in the new *Chambers's Encyclopædia* (1950), it "contains in its critical apparatus the fullest collection of evidence yet assembled." E.D.]

will be furnished by the following tributes paid to it by competent judges.

Bishop Ellicott (Chairman of New Testament Revision Committee):

The edition of Tregelles will last, perhaps to the very end of time, as a noble monument of faithful, enduring and accurate labour in the cause of Truth; it will always be referred to as a uniquely trustworthy collection of assorted critical materials of the greatest value, and as such it will probably never be superseded.

Dr. Scrivener:

The volume is a beautiful specimen of typography, and its arrangement is very convenient, particularly his happy expedient for showing at every open leaf the precise authorities that are extant at that place.

Dean Alford:

. . . and if Tischendorf has run into a fault on the side of speculative hypotheses as to the origin of readings found in those MSS., it must be confessed that Tregelles has sometimes erred on the (certainly, far safer) side of scrupulous adherence to the mere literal evidence of the ancient MSS. I would beg my readers to carry away in their minds the impression of my thorough concurrence with his principles on the whole, and of my great value for his Biblical labours, and for the spirit of painstaking and accuracy and reverence which everywhere distinguishes them.

B. W. Newton:

Dr. Tregelles has, on other occasions, shown that he has powers of exegesis of no ordinary kind. He has also his own grammatical theories, and fixed theological opinions. But his duty as an editor was not to say what, in his opinion, *might* or *ought* to have been written, but to ascertain what had been written. The exercise of such scholarly sagacity as would have been required in exegesis is inadmissible here. He was bound to work, in the strictest sense, mechanically. It is the highest praise to say that he felt this, and that he strove to be rigidly mechanical. If he had permitted his critical instinct, or his predilections (no matter on what based) to influence his decisions on questions of *fact*, his work would have been valueless. It would have given us *the opinions of Dr. Tregelles*, but it would have been no record of facts. As it is, he has placed before us, so far as was in his power, the words which were received, in the times nearest to the Apostles, as the words of God.

Dr. E. W. Bullinger wrote in his *How to Enjoy the Bible*:

Tregelles produced his text on principles which were substantially the same as Lachmann, but he admits the evidence of uncial manuscripts down to the seventh century, and includes a careful testing of a wide circle of other authorities. The chief value of his text lies not only in this, but in its scrupulous fidelity and accuracy, and is probably the best and most exact presentation of the original text of the New Testament ever published.

When Tregelles is supported by any (one or more) of the others (i.e. Griesbach, Lachmann, Tischendorf, or Alford) his readings may be relied upon as being the best attested and most worthy of being regarded as the original and inspired Text of the Greek New Testament.

Professor Benjamin B. Warfield, D.D., is considered one of the world's greatest theologians of the Calvinistic school since the days of Dr. Charles Hodge. He occupied for many years the chair of Theology at Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A. These extracts are taken from his valuable little work: *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (pp. 112-13, 224-5):

A great step forward is taken when we propose to allow MSS. weight, not according to their age, but according to the age of the text which they contain. To Tregelles must be ascribed the honour of introducing this method of procedure, which he appropriately calls "Comparative Criticism". It is a truly scientific method, and leads us for the first time to safe results. . . .

What may be done towards settling the text by this method may be observed by the text which Dr. Tregelles actually framed, and which stands to-day as his suitable and honourable monument. . . .

We cannot go further back than the texts of Tischendorf and Tregelles for examples of what criticism has attained, as the original text of the New Testament. Tischendorf's text fluctuated considerably in the various editions which he put forth, but it is unfair to judge his results now by any but his eighth and final edition, the text of which was completed just before his death. The comparative values of the three great modern texts—the eighth edition of Tischendorf (1864-1872), the one great edition of Tregelles (1857-1879), and the recently issued edition of Westcott and Hort (1881, and re-issued 1885)—need hardly be discussed here. It is enough to set down plainly the fact that these three editions indicate the high water mark of modern criticism, and to point out that they agree in their settlement of the greater part of the text.

G. H. FROMOW.

London.