

Textual Criticism

F.F. Bruce, M.A.

**Head of the Department of Biblical History and Literature
in the University of Sheffield**

[p.135]

The doctrinal basis of the I.V.F. includes among the truths of Christianity which the Fellowship is concerned to uphold 'the divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture, *as originally given*, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.' The words printed here in italics are important. The books of the Bible were first written many centuries ago—the latest of them over eighteen centuries ago and they have been copied and re-copied many times since then. They were, first written in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, and the vast majority of people who read them today read them in translations. But neither copyists nor translators are infallible. and the cautionary phrase, 'as originally given', is inserted in the statement of belief to indicate that allowance must be made for errors in transmission and translation—'E. & O.E.', so to speak. The I.V.F., in other words, is not committed to the verbal inspiration of the Authorized Version or any other version—not even the Revised Standard Version.

With errors in translation we are not concerned in this article. But it is the inevitability of errors in the process of copying and recopying documents that makes the science of textual criticism necessary. This science endeavours as far as possible to establish the exact wording that was used in the original document, in the original writer's autograph.

Textual criticism is not, of course, an exclusively biblical discipline; it has to be invoked in the study of most ancient literature, and some more recent literature as well. Students of Shakespeare know how difficult it is at times to determine the original wording in certain passages of his plays, owing to variations in the earliest printed editions; for example, does Ariel's song in *The Tempest* (Act 5, Scene 1) begin 'Where the bee sucks, there *suck* I' or 'Where the bee sucks, there *lurk* I'?

But in general there is much less scope for textual criticism in printed works than in manuscripts. In modern printing methods, with successive proof-revisions by a number of readers, the chance of error is reduced to a minimum. Even so, it is not reduced to extinction, as authors, publishers and printers know to their cost; misprints insist on creeping in. Some very curious misprints have crept into printed editions of the English Bible. There was, for instance, the 'Wicked Bible' of 1632 which omitted the important word 'not' front the Seventh Commandment; for this inadvertence Archbishop Laud fined the printers £300. Another edition displays the very appropriate misprint in Ps. cxix. 161, '*Printers* have persecuted me without a cause.'

Before the invention of printing in Europe in the middle of the fifteenth century, however, the work of copying and recopying was carried out laboriously by hand. If errors cannot be completely eliminated even with all the facilities for their detection provided by printing processes, the opportunities for their intrusion are much more plentiful when each

copy is a separate manuscript. The scribe may copy from another manuscript lying before him, or he may copy from the dictation of a companion who reads the exemplar aloud. There are some errors which are specially liable to occur when the scribe's eye plays him false, and others which are more common when his ear plays him false. And in addition to slips of that kind we have to reckon with the 'clever' scribe, who thinks he detects a mis-

[p.136]

take in his exemplar, and writes down not what is actually there, but what he thinks ought to be there.

When we are dealing with literature which has been copied and recopied so often, and over so great a stretch of time, as the books of the Bible, we might well wonder whether the original wording has not been so greatly obscured by the accumulation of copyists' errors as to be irrecoverable. But as a matter of fact the degree of uncertainty is reassuringly small. The very abundance of the evidence which has resulted from so much copying and recopying means that an error in one manuscript or group of manuscripts is likely to be corrected by reference to some other manuscript or group of manuscripts.

The situation with regard to Hebrew manuscripts is so different from the situation with regard to Greek manuscripts that the two should be considered separately.

HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS

The Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament took over a thousand years to grow, and the latest of them is not later than the second century B.C. But if we look at the Preface to the Revised Version of the Old Testament (1884) we find a statement that the earliest biblical Hebrew manuscript of which the date is certainly known was written in A.D. 916. (This is a codex of the Prophets at Leningrad.) There are a few manuscripts a little older than that, but in general it is true to say that until six years ago the oldest Hebrew manuscripts which were of any value for the study of the Old Testament text were over a thousand years later than the latest parts of the Old Testament, and some two thousand years later than its earliest parts.

In view of this great gap separating the date of the original documents from the date of the earliest surviving copies, it might have been thought that the degree of scribal corruption in the interval must have been quite considerable. There were, however, a number of reassuring factors. One was the known meticulousness and conscientiousness with which the copyists of the Hebrew Scriptures carried out their work in the early centuries of the Christian era. Another was the existence of translations of the Hebrew Scriptures into other languages, such as the Greek Septuagint version made in the third and second centuries B.C. and the Latin Vulgate of Jerome about A.D. 400. Copies of the Greek Septuagint had survived from a date some five hundred years earlier than the earliest known Hebrew copies, and in spite of a number of textual deviations it was plain that the Hebrew text used at the time when the Septuagint was translated was substantially the same as that exhibited by the Hebrew manuscripts of a thousand years later. As regards the Pentateuch, there was also the check provided by the Samaritan Bible, an edition of

the Hebrew text of the first five books which had come down by a separate line of transmission since 400 B.C. at the latest.

From all these witnesses it was evident that the Hebrew text during the thousand years preceding the time when the earliest surviving manuscripts were copied had not suffered so much from corruption as might have been feared. And this inference has now been confirmed by the discovery within the past six years of a large number of Hebrew biblical texts in the Wadi Qumran. north-west of the Dead Sea. which are credibly dated in the first century B.C. or first century A.D. Much work remains to be done on these discoveries (and we hope that further discoveries of the same kind may be made), but enough is already known of them to carry the evidence confirming the trustworthiness of the Hebrew text as previously known back over a period of more than a millennium, well into the pre-Christian era.

An interesting study for the reader of the English Bible, so far as the textual criticism of the Old Testa-

[p.137]

ment is concerned, is to take the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and compare it with the older Revised Version. The footnotes in the Revised Standard Version make frequent reference to the old translations of the Hebrew Bible (in Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, Latin), and also to the Samaritan Bible, and an examination of these footnotes together with the texts to which they refer will show the way in which these early versions sometimes differ from the traditional Hebrew text and occasionally help us to correct it. But in general it is true to say that scholars are now much less inclined to make wholesale emendations in the Hebrew text on the basis of the versions. In some places, however, the versions (especially the Greek Septuagint) are very helpful, especially where they preserve some words which have accidentally fallen out of the Hebrew. Such words are those which Cain addressed to Abel in Gen. iv. 8 ('Let us go out to the field'), the full wording of King Saul's prayer in 1 Sam. xiv. 41 (which incidentally throws welcome light on the use of the oracle of Urim and Thummim), and the complete text of Solomon's prefatory invocation at the dedication of the Temple in I Kings viii. 12 f. (although the new revisers have curiously omitted at the end of verse 13 the sentence also preserved in the Septuagint: 'Behold, is it not written in the Book of Jashar?').

Sometimes textual criticism has to be, invoked not in deciding between two or more variant readings (whether in manuscripts of the original text or in other versions) but between two or more possible ways of dividing groups of letters into words. (Very often ancient manuscripts show a text written without any division between words.) Here is an example from the Old Testament. In the Revised Version of Amos vi. 12 we read: 'Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow *there* with oxen?'—'*there*' being italicized to show that it does not represent any word in the Hebrew. But the word translated 'oxen' is curious; it is the plural of a collective noun, much as if we were to speak of 'tattles' in English. The vowel signs of the Hebrew Bible were not added to the text until the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.; the original text consists only of consonants. The consonants of the word in question may be transcribed as *bqrym*. But if one divides these consonants so

as to read *bqr ym*, two advantages follow. The collective noun meaning 'oxen' or 'cattle' has now its normal singular form, and we have an additional word *ym* (*yam* if we add its vowel) meaning 'sea' to provide a parallel to 'rock' in the preceding clause. Then we have two parallel clauses both of which express (as the prophet intended) impossibilities, rendered thus in the Revised Standard Version: 'Do horses run upon rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen?'

GREEK MANUSCRIPTS

The situation with regard to Greek biblical manuscripts is quite different from that which obtains in the case of Hebrew manuscripts, in that the interval between the date of the original documents and that of the oldest surviving copies is so short as to be almost negligible. There are in existence some four thousand manuscripts of the New Testament writings, in whole or in part. The latest of these belong to the period immediately before and after the invention of printing in Europe; the earliest go back to the second century. The earliest of all is a papyrus fragment of John's Gospel, housed in the Rylands Library, Manchester. The copy of which this fragment is all that remains was written (probably in Egypt) not later than A.D. 140—that is to say, not more than fifty years after the traditional date of the actual composition of the Gospel. From the second century we have a number of other manuscript fragments; from the third century much more ample manuscript material

[p.138]

(including in particular the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, discovered about 1931); from the fourth century we have the two most valuable manuscripts of the Greek Bible—the Vatican Codex in Rome and the Sinaitic Codex in the British Museum. From these early Christian centuries we have also the earliest translations of the New Testament into other languages—in particular, Latin, Syriac and Coptic. Thus from the earliest centuries of Christianity we have excellent evidence of the text of the New Testament, and the material becomes increasingly abundant in the centuries that follow.

There is, in fact, no body of ancient literature whose manuscript attestation is comparable with that of the New Testament, either for abundance or for the shortness of the gap separating the date of the autographs from that of the earliest known manuscripts. To be sure, the abundance of copies means that the number of textual variations arising from scribal errors is greatly increased, but at the same time it means that there is ample material by which we may check such errors.

In the earlier Christian centuries the copying of the New Testament tended more and more to be carried out most intensively at the great centres of Christianity such as Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch, Rome, and (after the time of Constantine) Constantinople. In this way certain textual variations came in course of time to be specially associated with one or other of these centres, and the manuscripts can thus be classified according as they belong to the Alexandrian family, the Caesarean family, and so on. After the peace of the Church and the founding of Constantinople, the prestige of the new imperial capital and the church there became so great that the type of text associated with it came to be the

dominant one wherever the Greek New Testament was copied. Most of the later Greek manuscripts of the New Testament therefore tend to exhibit this Constantinopolitan form of text, and this was the form of text naturally adopted when the Greek Testament was first printed early in the sixteenth century and used as the basis of the new translations of the Reformation and post-Reformation period (Luther's, Tyndale's, the Authorized Version and so forth). The Constantinopolitan type of text, however, was not so early as those of Alexandria and the other places mentioned, and more recent editions of the Greek Testament, together with more recent translations into modern languages, have in general conformed to these older types. The Revised New Testament of 1881, for example, and Westcott and Hort's edition of the Greek Testament which appeared about the same time, are based in the main on the Alexandrian type of text, which is exhibited by the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts. The Revised Standard Version, on the other hand, is more eclectic, choosing readings now from one and now from another of the earlier types of text (but not from the later type associated with Constantinople).

Some readers of the English Bible are at times perturbed when they find that some more recent translation has altered or entirely omitted some words with which they have been familiar in the Authorized Version. It is right and proper that ordinary Christians should be vigilant lest they should be deprived of some vital and valuable element in their faith or in the foundation documents of that faith. But they need not be disquieted; among all the textual variations which they may find represented in the various English versions that come to their notice there is not one which requires the least modification in any doctrine or practice of true Christianity. And the more tenaciously, they hold to the belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture, the more eager they should be to have the very wording of Scripture established and rendered as exactly as possible.

[p.139]

It is in this way that textual criticism renders such a valuable service. We do not wish to accept as Holy Scripture something which, in point of fact, may not have found its way into the biblical text until the fourth century A.D. Such a passage is the sentence which appears as I John v. 7 in the Authorized Version—the verse about the three that bear record in heaven. The first occurrence of this verse is in Latin, in the writings of Priscillian, a Spanish Christian, who died in A.D. 385; earlier copies of the New Testament, whether in Greek or in any other language, know nothing of it. Erasmus, the editor of the first printed Greek Testament to be published, rightly omitted it from his first two editions (1516 and 1519), and was persuaded against his better judgment to insert it in his third edition (1522) because it was found in one—but only one—Greek manuscript, and that a manuscript which had been written but a few years before, in the same century! Had Erasmus followed his better judgment, the verse would never have appeared in the Authorized Version, and most of us would never have heard of it. It is of course nonsense to suggest (as Jehovah's Witnesses do) that the doctrine of the Trinity depends on this verse, so that with the disappearance of the verse the doctrine disappears as well. No doctrine of the faith depends on one verse of Scripture only; every article of Christian belief and conduct is broadly based on the whole range of biblical teaching.

The study of the early textual families has carried our researches back to the middle of the

second century. Can we push them still farther back, into the first century itself? Nearly seventy years ago Dr. Warfield said: 'The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, His Book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men' (*Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p. 15). With the wealth of additional knowledge that has come to light since then, we need not be less hopeful today.

CONCLUSION

In 1647 the Westminster Assembly of Divines, in their Confession of Faith, spoke of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures as having been 'kept pure in all ages' by God's 'singular care and providence'. Thanks to the further progress in textual criticism during the three centuries that have gone by since then, we can appreciate even more fully than their contemporaries could what abundant justification they had for such a statement.

© 1953 Universities & Colleges Christian Fellowship. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in May 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
