

How the Bible Came to Us - #20

Do We Have the Right Words?

1. This study will discuss the issues in producing what is called a “critical text” of the New Testament. Note that because of the way the Hebrew Old Testament was copied and the manuscripts replaced systematically by Jewish communities, the challenge of discovering the “original” text of the Old Testament is quite different.
2. There are literally thousands of different documents that might help us to discover the original wording of the Greek New Testament. There are not only some five thousand Greek manuscripts to be considered and compared, but also there are tens of thousands of manuscripts in other languages. In some cases those translations go back to times which are earlier than the earliest Greek manuscripts that we have!
3. So, the challenge is to try to discover, as far as possible, what the original writers of the New Testament wrote. This quest came out of the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent comparison of different Greek manuscripts. It was soon apparent that there was considerable variation in the “original” Greek texts that were being used for translations into other languages.
4. It was worrisome to “true believers” that their favorite versions in English and in other modern languages were based on relatively late Greek manuscripts. There was even evidence that on some occasions, there were intentional variations introduced into the text.
5. So, the first challenge for scholars and lovers of antiquity was to discover as many ancient Greek manuscripts as they possibly could from anywhere they might be hidden around the world.
6. It soon became apparent that there were not only Greek manuscripts—some five thousand of them for the New Testament—but there were also scores of thousands of manuscripts in other languages. Furthermore, there were scores of thousands of documents from early church leaders who often quoted Scripture. Because all of those documents were hand-written, there are no two that are exactly alike!
7. Before the days of computers, to try to compare thousands of documents to discover all the possible variations of wording in even one passage of Scripture was a daunting task.
8. Fortunately, they soon discovered that those documents could be divided into “families.” By far the majority of the texts from Europe were from the *Byzantine* or *Koine* tradition from which we get the *Textus Receptus*.
9. But, as older manuscripts were discovered in more remote locations, scholars began to realize that those older manuscripts varied in more significant ways. Eventually, they identified three other “families” of texts which came to be known as the Alexandrian, the Western, and the Caesarean. So, at the end of the first stage of the process of discovering the “original” Greek words of the New Testament, there were an enormous number of documents in Greek from Western Europe in the *Koine*, or *Byzantine*, tradition and relatively few documents from the other three traditions.
10. One of the earliest stimuli for a critical edition of the Bible came from Richard Simon (1638-1712), a Roman Catholic Oratorian priest. Richard Simon was not working to get a better text for the Bible. Instead, he was challenging Protestants because of all the variants he saw in the “reading” of different manuscripts! He believed all of those variant readings meant Scripture was not reliable, and therefore, could not be our standard or norm!
11. The next challenge was to decide how all of those texts were to be compared or weighed. If one is trying to establish what the “original” manuscript written by John, Luke, or Paul said, how does one “weigh” the different Greek manuscripts in front of him? J. E. Bengel (1687-1752) established certain rules for deciding how to compare one group of manuscripts with another group.
 - 1) The manuscripts should be *weighed* in the sense that they should be evaluated based on how likely they are to be close to the original document, rather than just counted. Thus, older documents tend to carry more weight than more recent documents.
 - 2) The shorter reading is to be preferred. By studying the manuscripts carefully and by observing copyists at their work, it became apparent that as a general rule, copyists tended to add words to the

text rather than subtracting them. So, if a manuscript has a longer version of some passage in it, it is likely that the extra words have been added later.

3) The reading which seems to be more difficult is normally to be preferred. In general, copyists tended to prefer a simpler reading that agreed with their own beliefs rather than a more difficult reading, especially if they were not sure of its meaning. Thus, copyists tried to “improve” the document that they were “writing.” They tended to prefer what they thought it “ought to say” rather than what may have been in front of them in the text they were copying.

12. Let us give some examples. Look at John 1:18. The Greek text states, “No one has ever seen God. The only begotten ____ who is at the Father’s side has revealed him.” The *Textus Receptus*, and by far the majority of the more modern manuscripts, have *uios*, the word for “son” in the blank space. So, many translations read, “No one has ever seen God. The only begotten **Son** who is at the Father’s side has revealed him.” That fits with common Christian thinking and is an easy reading.
13. But, when we turn to the oldest manuscripts, some of those papyri, like P⁶⁶ and P⁷², instead of *uios* in that blank space have *theos*—the word for God. That would change the reading to say, “No one has ever seen God. The only begotten **God** who is at the Father’s side has revealed him.” That sounds to us like a mistake. It is a much more “difficult reading” because that is not what we expect. Furthermore, the Bible writers were very reluctant to call Jesus “God.” But that is what is found in the earliest manuscripts.
14. In 1751-1752, Johannes Bengel and his friend, J. J. Wettstein (1693-1754) first produced a *Novum Testamentum Graece* which was a two volume edition of the New Testament with a lot of the variant readings organized into categories. The Greek text that they printed was the *Textus Receptus*, but the footnotes showed a number of variants. Remember, however, that in the middle of the 18th century, the number of documents to be compared was relatively limited.
15. After Count von Tischendorf had discovered several of the more ancient manuscripts, J. J. Griesbach (1745-1812) and Carl Lachmann (1793-1851) decided to set about “restoring” the Greek text from which those 4th century documents were produced. They were trying to determine what the Greek text looked like in the days when Jerome first translated the Vulgate and when those 50 copies of the Greek Bible were produced for Constantine.
16. Count von Tischendorf, himself, soon entered the field and produced several critical editions of the Greek New Testament.
17. Two very famous Biblical scholars, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, began to identify different biblical text groups or “families.” In 1881, they produced a very important critical edition based on the idea that manuscripts belong in “families.” Their basic text was based on the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus because they believed that was the earliest, fairly-complete text available. They called that text the “neutral text.” They then tried to explain all variations from it based on readings from other manuscripts, especially other “families.”
18. By far the most famous critical edition of the New Testament used today was produced originally by Eberhardt Nestlé in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Nestlé realized that a great deal of work had gone into the earlier critical editions. So, he produced a text in which he took three previous critical editions—the ones of Westcott and Hort, von Tischendorf, and another that had recently been produced by Johannes Weiss. He then gave as the “correct reading” the reading that was agreed upon by two of those three previous critical editions. He believed that represented the best scholarly thinking available at the time. After Nestlé finished his work, the Aland family joined him and began to produce revised critical editions every few years. We now have the Nestlé-Aland 27th edition, and it forms the basis that virtually all scholars use to determine the best readings of the text of the New Testament.
19. If one looks at the Nestle-Aland 27th edition, he will see the Greek text which they believe is best supported by the scholarly evidence filling most of the page. At the bottom of the page is a “critical apparatus” which gives—in a special “shorthand” kind of “language”—most of the variations that are available in other texts. It requires years of training just to read such a volume!
20. But, it is an amazing benefit to scholars to be able to take one small book like that and in that one

book to find virtually all the possible variations—with notations—telling which manuscripts have those variations so scholars can make up their own minds about what the “original” must have said.

21. A refinement of that text has been produced by the Bible societies. It not only gives the major variants in the text but assigns the letter A, B, C, or D to each of those variations. If the variation is an “A,” it means scholars are almost certain that the wording in the text is the correct one. If the variant is a “B,” then it means scholars have some disagreement as to whether the reading in the text or the reading in the footnote is correct. If the reading is a “C,” then it means that one “guess” is probably as good as the other! Occasionally, there are “D” readings to suggest that the original is unclear! (See Mark 6:22)
22. So, when someone sets about to translate a portion of the New Testament today, he will sit down with Nestlé-Aland’s 27th edition in front of him and have the benefit of the work of hundreds of scholars who have dedicated their lives to categorizing and putting together all of those variations.
23. That text is much more scholarly and much more likely to represent the “original text” as it was written by the original author than the text available to the translators of the King James Version or even the translators of the Douay-Rheims.
24. Having said that, however, we recognize that this critical edition which scholars use has never been a “believer’s” Bible that someone would read to establish his faith. It is a reconstructed text based on the best scholarship available, and this side of the kingdom we will never know exactly why all the variants were introduced.
25. One fascinating study which some scholars have now taken up is to try to determine why some of the variants came about. Each of the variants represents a Bible which someone at one time considered to be the “Word of God.” It represents, in effect, a period of Christian history. Thus, the variants might give us insight into how they understood God’s Word in their day. Let us then summarize the process which scholars go through in trying to determine the best reading for any given verse in the Bible.

1) We must begin by recognizing that every manuscript and particularly the more ancient manuscripts were produced by and for communities, many of them very small, which were surrounded by paganism and for whom that Bible text was their “lifeline” to a higher power and authority. Those manuscripts are priceless evidence for the history of the biblical text.

Every text that we look at today—especially the later ones—have survived through an extended process of copying, reading, and being copied again, and thus, are themselves subject to the same forces that may have created the original variants in the earlier texts. Thus, it is quite possible in some of the later manuscripts that we are looking at variants of variants.

The vast majority of variants can be easily understood as simple mistakes in spelling or simple mistakes in hearing “dictation” from a prior copy of the Bible—mistakes that can be easily explained.

2) But, a large number of variants remain which are words or even phrases added and in some cases considerable sections of text added that seem to be in the nature of commentary or expansion. Why did the copyists decide to introduce those additional words? What do the additions tell us about their own religious experience? Were the changes intentional or as a result of some unintentional process? In any case, they give us a small window into the copyist’s thinking.

3) There is another area to be considered by scholars. Some of the very oldest manuscripts that we have available are not biblical documents, per se, but rather sermons or arguments written down by early church fathers. In those materials, they would naturally quote from the Bible as they had it available to them. The numerous scholars from North Africa around Carthage would quote from the Old Latin. Scholars living further east would quote either from one of their Greek manuscripts or in some cases from the Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Syriac, etc. documents that they were using at the time.

Hebrew scholars produced the *Midrashim*, including the *Midrash*, *Mishnah*, and the *Talmud* which were full of biblical material. Such evidences are obviously fragmentary but the large amount of such material is impressive. It raises additional questions. Did those scholars carefully check their biblical

manuscript before they quoted? Or were they “quoting” from perhaps “sloppy” memory?

4) When the scholar comes down to deciding which word or which spelling he is going to include in his text, there are ultimately only two options: the “objective” or the “conjectural.” Another word for the “conjectural” might be the “rational.” It means the scholar has carefully thought through all the issues and studied the context very carefully; and in some cases he has come up with a word which he thinks is the original source for all the variations he sees in the manuscripts, but, in fact, is not found in any of them! That is certainly not “just guessing”!

The “objective” method obviously includes looking at the manuscripts available and picking out from them the best reading based on the best scholarship.

The “conjectural” method often involves things like grammatical considerations, poetic structure, the logic of the context, circumstances connected to the ancient writers time and beliefs, and, of course, his own best judgment.

While our discussion here involves only the New Testament, it should be recognized that when looking at the Old Testament text with many fewer documents available for consideration, scholars often have to use their best judgment in reestablishing what they believe is the correct text. But, it is still true that readings of some passages in the Old Testament and even the New Testament with all its manuscript evidence are sometimes based on the best scholarly “guesswork” possible.

5) So, the first challenge to the biblical scholar is to determine whether the reading which he is considering for a given text is likely the original text written by the original author. Is it possible to explain all the other variants of that reading if that one is the original? Can one explain the “corruption” involved in the variants seen in other versions, in patristic sources, or by simple mistakes in copying? Is there a linguistic aberration or a logical or chronological disconnect, anachronism, or irregularity in literary structure that makes the original reading suspect? This is a very difficult and challenging science. In some cases, readings which scholars earlier believed to be errors have been proved to be correct by later scholarship and additional manuscript consideration!

6) When considering versions or translations in early languages, first, the scholar must try to determine the original reading in the language of the version. Then, he must do his best to decide what Greek or Hebrew word or phrase was the source of that translation. Finally, he must decide if that “original” was really the original that the writer was working from or if there may have been other considerations that caused him to translate as he did.

7) When we look at many of the ancient documents, there are two final considerations that must come into play. Particularly in ancient Hebrew, the forms of the letters have changed over time, and some of the letters look almost the same. Is it possible that the letters may have been confused at some point?

8) On some occasions we are fortunate enough to have parallel passages in other books of the Bible. Do those parallel passages agree with the one we are considering?

26. When all of this is said and done, the scholar must put all of the evidence together and hopefully give each piece of evidence the proper “weight” and then make an intelligent decision about how all the pieces fit together. Then, the scholar must come up with the best possible answer to the question, “What did the original author say or write?”

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