

# Know the Scriptures - Part Three

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## Textual Criticism

How can we possibly know the Scriptures as they were originally inspired by the Holy Spirit and written down by the prophets, evangelists and apostles, since we no longer have the original autographs? We saw how God has preserved His message for us by means of many witnesses: the manuscripts, copies in the original language of the autographs; the versions, translations of these manuscripts into the common language of the day; and the quotations from the early church writers. But we also saw how it became possible for numerous errors to creep into the texts, due to unintentional slips of the pen or to deliberate, although honest, changes by the scribe. How does one now go about determining what is good and what is bad?

The science that concerns itself with recovering the exact words of the author's original writing from the many witnesses that exist is called "textual criticism". Because the textual critic knows that the only way to have a reliable translation that can be read and understood by the people of any age, there must be a reliable source. He knows that translations from a faulty original will be faulty likewise, so he tries to weed out the chaff of bad readings, slips and changes, ending up with as nearly as possible, the autographs of the "holy men of God." Over the past three or four centuries, there has developed a basic set of "rules" for the serious textual critic. These are not hard and fast, but they serve as general principles to guide the critic's task of sifting, sorting, weighing, and weeding. Before we discuss the witnesses themselves, we want to take a brief look at these rules.

## Age

Generally, the earlier the manuscript, the more likely it is to be correct. If an error has crept into a manuscript, it will probably be repeated by the next copyist; and he, in turn, may add errors of his own. As the number of copies increases, therefore, the errors will

likely also increase. You can easily test this yourself by copying several pages of the Bible, handing your manuscript on to a friend to copy, and he to another, and so on. Then compare the tenth copy with the original to see how many errors have crept in. This is only a general rule, however, since it is possible that a manuscript of 1500 A.D. was copied directly from one of 300 A.D. and thus would be more correct than one dated 500 A.D. In the above example, the tenth copy would have resembled the original more exactly if it had been made from the third rather than the ninth.

## Degree of Difficulty

Where the wording of two or more manuscripts disagrees, usually the more difficult reading is to be preferred, unless it is an obvious blunder. The scribes, as do we all, had a tendency to try to improve upon a passage or word which they did not understand. They would not, on the other hand, intentionally substitute a harsh or unusual reading for one that was clear and understandable.

Here we may also include the rule that the shorter reading is to be preferred over the longer. The copyist would more likely add or insert words and phrases than omit them, sometimes as comments on the margins or between the lines and sometimes in the text itself. You can see that the next copyist might easily include these additions as part of the text in the interest of passing along a complete, neat copy to his successors.

## Quality vs. Quantity

Another principle of textual criticism is that the sources of a variant reading must be carefully sifted and classified, and the authorities must be weighed rather than counted. One independent manuscript may be worth more than a hundred copies made from the same original. In other words, quality is much more important than quantity.

Wescott and Hort, mentioned earlier, have separated the manuscripts, versions and other writings into categories or families, (we refer now to witnesses of the New Testament), namely,

1. The **Western**, which has a tendency to paraphrase and insert

words from parallel passages or other sources;

2. The **Alexandrian**, which is much purer, but has a tendency to polish the language;
3. The **Syrian**, which borrowed from all sources in an effort to remove stumbling-blocks and to present the New Testament in a smooth and attractive form; and
4. The **Neutral**, which comes nearest the original of the apostles and whose few sources are the oldest known to be in existence.

You can see that, if one reading for a word or verse is found in family (1) or (3) or even both of them and the manuscripts in family (4) support a different reading, the textual critic would be moved to choose the latter because it would be supported by the best authorities, rather than the most.

### **Same or Different**

In the Gospels particularly we find many parallel texts relating various incidents in the life of our Lord or reporting His discourses with His disciples. In such parallel texts, where different readings are found, they are usually preferred over identical readings. The evangelists all paint but one picture of Jesus: He is the Son of God. Yet each of them often uses different words and expressions in describing Him and in reporting His sayings. Over the years the scribes tended to harmonize these parallel passages, whether by design or by accident we cannot say. In such instances the text that preserves these tiny differences is usually preferred.

### **There are More**

These are not the only principles followed by the textual critic in his efforts to establish a text that is as close to the original autograph as possible. The others are more technical. When he follows these rules, the mass of variant readings become an asset rather than a liability. What you and I might consider to be a maze of bewildering words and phrases, the trained critic will regard as a wealth of material in which is preserved the original reading.

Convinced of this, he will set to work to find it.

And so he has. Several learned scholars have made such exhaustive studies. Notable among them are the aforementioned Wescott and Hort. Applying the above principles to the existing manuscripts, versions, and writings of the Fathers, they have reconstructed or restored a Greek New Testament which stands in the front ranks today, 90 years after it was published. New discoveries have been made as late as 1958, papyri which are more than 100 years older than any used in the Greek text of 1881, but none of them diminishes the confidence your pastor places in the texts he uses in his study and whose richness he transmits to you in the sermon and Bible study.

### **Review of some of the General Principles of Textual Criticism**

1. The age of the source of the manuscript is more significant than the age of the manuscript itself.
2. Readings supported by ancient witnesses, especially if the witnesses are from different groups, are preferable.
3. The quality of the witness is more important than the quantity in determining a reading.
4. The shorter reading is generally preferable.
5. In parallel texts differing readings are preferred.
6. The more difficult reading is generally preferable.
7. Readings which bear the earmarks of stylistic or grammatical improvements are suspect.
8. Readings which bear the earmarks of doctrinal controversy are suspect.
9. The reading is preferred which best suits the author's characteristic tendencies.