

# THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

John W. Wenham

Twenty years ago John Wenham produced the first edition of his book, 'Christ and the Bible'. It was an exemplary piece of reverent, careful evangelical scholarship. Cogently, he demonstrated Jesus' own view of the Bible and showed how the master's view is one which all his followers are expected to adopt. To a whole generation of students (in particular) it was a book which offered solid foundations upon which to build a truly evangelical faith.

The reissue of this book is to be welcomed. The emergence of a new 'evangelicalism' which is happy to concede whole areas to liberal theory demonstrates the need for a restatement of biblical evangelicalism's view of Scripture. In this situation, Wenham's book remains highly relevant and up-to-date.

Of particular interest in the new and revised edition is Wenham's advocacy of the Byzantine text. His views on this issue are here reprinted with permission in the hope that they will stimulate fresh thinking in this area and (more importantly) to encourage those who have not done so to go out and buy a vitally important book!

## Comparison With Classical Texts

In the case of the New Testament it seems at first sight very serious that we have no manuscript of the complete New Testament earlier than the fourth century. Much could have happened to the church's documents in the first three hundred storm-tossed years of its history. Yet, relatively, even this interval is a short one. To quote F. G. Kenyon:

For all the words of classical antiquity we have to depend on manuscripts written long after their original composition. The author who is in the best position in this respect is Virgil; yet the earliest manuscript of Virgil that we now possess was written some 350 years after his death. For all other classical writers, the interval between the date of the author and the earliest extant manuscript of his works is much greater. For Livy it is about 500 years, for Horace 900, for most of Plato 1,300, for Euripides 1,600. On the other hand, the great vellum uncials of the New Testament were written perhaps 250 years after the date when the Gospels were actually composed.

In addition, we now have papyri of considerable portions of the New Testament which reduce the interval by a further hundred years. For instance, two of the Bodmer Papyri (P66 and P75) are dated about AD 200. P66 preserves 94 per cent of John's Gospel,

and it is clear from its corrections that it was itself a copy of two yet earlier manuscripts—how much earlier, no one can say.

It may seem cold comfort to answer the charge that the state of the New Testament text is bad by saying that the state of the classical texts is much worse. But the truth is that the state of the classical texts is not bad. The philosophers feel justified in laying great weight even upon minute turns of phrase in Plato in spite of the 1,300 year gap. In the case of the New Testament, with its gap of 100 to 150 years, the text is not merely not bad, it is very good.

## The Theory Of Textual Criticism

The existence of more than 100,000 small variants is not in reality an embarrassment, except in the sense that it is an embarrassment of riches. The multitude of variants is simply the result of the multitude of manuscripts, of which there are several thousand still in existence which antedate the printing-press. The problem of New Testament textual criticism arises from the gigantic scale of the task, if all materials are to be used to the full. In principle the theory of textual criticism is straightforward enough. In its simplest form the history of a text is like the growth of a tree. The stem of the tree is the original manuscript. When this is transcribed certain mistakes are made, which are normally incorporated in all copies that are derived from it. Thus a branch of the tree grows, consisting of manuscripts that have certain characteristics in common. This subdivides again and again, forming new branches and twigs and shoots. Now if the manuscripts are arranged according to their greater and lesser common characteristics, it should theoretically be quite easy to sort out the family tree, and get back nearer and nearer to the common stem. A manuscript's importance will depend, not upon its date, but upon its place in the tree. Conceivably a fourteenth-century manuscript might have been carefully copied directly from a second-century one, which would give it an importance out of all proportion to its date.

Another helpful line of study is provided by 'Versions'—that is to say, by translations into other languages. The versions undergo their own processes of textual corruption, yet independently of the changes taking place in the manuscripts in the original language. The family tree of the version can be constructed, and this gives valuable evidence of the Greek text at the date when it was translated. A third line of study is provided by quotations in Christian

writers. If the family tree of the manuscripts of the works of each 'Father' is constructed, it may give valuable evidence as to the text in existence when he wrote.

But unfortunately the textual tree does not grow so simply. While new variations are continually being created, old variations are frequently being eliminated by deliberate revision, whether by individual or official action; similarly, quotations in the Fathers may become assimilated to a later contemporary form. The interacting forces are extremely complex. As E. C. Colwell says, 'We are dealing not with ordinary trees but with a thicket or jungle composed of banyans and mangroves, trees growing upside down, dropping roots from branches.'

### The progress of textual criticism

Textual criticism made great strides from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The mediaeval church in the West was almost wholly dependent on the Vulgate, a fine Latin translation made by the great scholar Jerome about AD 400 from a critical text which he himself had prepared for the purpose. The Vulgate itself suffered the usual chances of a thousand years of copying. The Renaissance brought back the New Testament in Greek to its rightful place as the only proper text for use in scholarly discussion. The Greek Testament of Erasmus, which was based mainly on seven fairly late manuscripts, was the foundation of the *Textus Receptus*, which is the text underlying the King James (Authorised) Version of 1611.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the collection and study of manuscripts proceeded apace, and progress was made in classifying them according to their general type of text. The great majority of manuscripts were, broadly speaking, of the type used by Erasmus. Particular interest was shown in manuscripts, some of them very ancient, which differed from this type. The publication in 1881 of *The New Testament in the Original Greek* by B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort marked a new epoch in textual criticism. In their lengthy introduction (believed to be mainly the work of Hort) they argued that the time had come to jettison the text of the majority of manuscripts and to replace it with one based on the two fourth-century manuscripts Codex Vaticanus (known by the symbol B) and Codex Sinaiticus (%).

Although Hort's theory was opposed by a handful of distinguished scholars, notably J. W. Burgon, F. H. A. Scrivener and H. C. Hoskier, it quickly won the day. The Revised Version was based upon the type of text which he advocated, and almost all subsequent texts and translations have followed suit, including the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New International Version and the Good News Bible.

During the twentieth century further strides have been made in collecting and studying the material. It is not easy to give an impression of the scale of modern textual studies that will do justice both to its astronomical extent and to its microscopic subject-matter. Since Hort's day, many new papyri containing parts of the New Testament have been discovered, a

number dating from the fourth or third century or even earlier. Scores of scholars have toiled away at these manuscripts and immense labour is being spent on the critical editions of the ancient versions and the Fathers. Merely to give an incomplete list of the versions considered to have relevance shows how monumental the task is: Old Latin (Italian, African and Spanish forms), Vulgate, Syriac (six varieties), Coptic (five varieties), Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Sogdian, Old Slavonic. The study of Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a Syriac harmony of the Gospels, first published about AD 170, and eventually translated into many languages, forms an independent segment of the field, highly complex, but promising valuable results. An illustration of the importance of the fathers is to be seen in the minute examination to which the biblical quotations of Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem have been subjected in the quest for the Caesarean text.

All this has given increased knowledge of what the third- and second-century texts must have been like. It is clear that there was already a wide diversity of variants in the late second century, which tells us one important thing. It means that by that time there had been no systematic editing to make them conform to some standard version. G. D. Kilpatrick considers it to be proved that our tradition reaches back from the time when the four Gospels circulated as a single Canon; before, that is, about AD 140. Similarly, there is reason to believe that the variations in the Epistles go back into the first century, before the formation of the Pauline Canon. Thus the very existence of variants is itself powerful evidence against a systematic, tendentious alteration of the manuscripts in the very early stages of the history of the text. Kilpatrick also declares that, in spite of our detailed knowledge of first- and second-century Greek, 'no one has so far shown that the New Testament is contaminated with the grammar or orthography of a later period'.

A remarkable growth in the conviction regarding the integrity of the text may be seen by comparing the attitude of Kilpatrick in 1957 with that of Westcott and Hort in 1885 with regard to supposed primitive errors that are suspected of having affected all existing documents. Westcott and Hort give a 'List of Suspected Readings', containing about forty-five such items. Over a good many of them the two editors did not agree, but more than a score carried their joint authority. Papyri discoveries, however, have disposed of some of them, and more careful criticism has disposed of others, so that in 1957, when Kilpatrick comes to discuss the substitution of 'javelin' for 'hyssop' at John 19:29, of which he says, 'No other conjecture in the New Testament has had the same plausibility', he rejects it decisively. He believes that we are fully justified in assuming 'as a rule of thumb that at each point the true text has survived somewhere or other among our manuscripts'. (Such an assumption would not be justified with some of the classical authors, or even with the Septuagint.) Kilpatrick even feels it necessary to give warning of the danger of 'correcting' our authors: 'The authors' copies cannot be assumed to be flawless', and 'if we set out to correct and improve everything which seems faulty, we soon find ourselves correcting our

authors and doing what the second-century scribes did.'

### The Call For Rational Criticism

All this has provided a mass of material which has been collected and made readily available for us in the critical editions of the Greek Testament. It is indeed an embarrassment of riches, because the question presses: What are we to do with it all? How are we to determine the original text? The current answer is: You must practise rational criticism.

This means that the reader must consider and weigh up a whole range of criteria. There is the external evidence: the date and character of each witness—manuscript, version or Father—of which of course there may be hundreds; and (more important) the date and character of the text-form to which each witness belongs (they are grouped under such designations as Proto-Alexandrian, Pre-Caesarean, Western, Byzantine); there is the geographical spread of the witnesses: are they all from one area or several? Have they any genealogical relationships?

Then there is the internal evidence: various principles (of uncertain value) are invoked. For instance, it is commonly said that shorter readings and harder readings are to be preferred. Also the notion that scribes tend to bring divergent passages into harmony is often invoked. Then intrinsic probabilities are judged, e.g. which reading accords best with the author's style in the rest of the book; or, what original reading best explains the variants?—with some critics this is quite the most important criterion.

It is obvious that nearly all these criteria have within them a large element of subjectivity, which has two results. It means that judgments of probability ideally call for immense learning, and in practice it also means that they vary greatly from scholar to scholar. So the layman is at the mercy of the experts, and the experts differ. It is often impossible to be sure what reading has even probability on its side, let alone what is right. Yet in the case of the classical authors, with the small numbers and the lateness of their witnesses, not nearly so much doubt is shown. Are we with our mountain of comparatively early witnesses right to be so uncertain? Are there not more solid, objective criteria that we ought to be using?

### Hort's legacy examined

In spite of all this labour and all this growth in knowledge, it has to be admitted that modern textual criticism has reached something of an impasse. The quest for early patterns of text has been disappointing and the exercise of supposedly 'rational criticism' has led to widely varying and quite insecure results. The question needs to be asked whether we are suffering from some far-reaching fault in critical method. There is reason to think that we are. Hort's whole argument was organized to discredit what as a young man he once called 'that vile *Textus Receptus*'. Ever since Hort's time, scholars have been wont to declare, not only the *Textus Receptus*, but the whole Byzantine

type of text, to be corrupt. Hort's case merits fuller statement and closer examination.

It was based mainly on three contentions. Firstly, he argued that the original text of the New Testament divided into four main branches at a comparatively early date. He maintained that three of these branches—the Western text, the Alexandrian text and the Byzantine (he called it Syrian) text—owed their origin to revisions carried out in particular localities, while the fourth (the Neutral text) had remained fairly close to the original. This would mean that we were dealing, not with hundreds of independent witnesses, but with four. And these four were of very different value, the Western and Alexandrian being inferior to the Neutral text, and the Byzantine text being inferior to all three.

Secondly, he sought to explain the unity-in-diversity of the Byzantine type of text by postulating one or more official revisions in the third and fourth centuries, which had laid their stamp on the main textual tradition of the Greek-speaking church. These revisions, he argued, had made use of the known variants in the earlier text-types, blending and harmonizing them to make a full and lucid text.

Thirdly, he sought to prove this by asserting that distinctively Byzantine readings were not to be found either in the earliest known manuscripts or in the quotations of Christian writers before the middle of the third century.

But all these contentions are dubious. Hort's position has been examined in detail in W. N. Pickering's book, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*. He shows that it is not true, even approximately, that the four supposed branches are sufficiently homogeneous to be traceable back to four common sources, the variants come in an infinitely complex number of permutations and combinations, and represent many independent witnesses, not just four. Further, the so-called Neutral text shows signs of editing at least as much as the other text-types.

The Western text has largely disintegrated as a result of attempts to identify new early groupings. For instance, a so-called Caesarean text-type has been widely acclaimed, supposedly already known in Egypt round about AD 250, used at times by Origen and influential well into the Middle Ages. Hardly had this text-type been postulated than it began to disintegrate into pre-Caesarean and Caesarean types. The Alexandrian texts too were regrouped as Alexandrian and Proto-Alexandrian.

As to the supposed official revisions which are said to have given the majority-text its form, they are unknown to history. But an official revision backed by sufficient authority to change the textual tradition of the greater part of the far-flung church would have been a momentous happening, if it had taken place. As is well known in the parallel case when Jerome at the behest of Pope Damasus tried to bring order out of the chaos of Old Latin texts, his seeming tampering with the text was met with a *furor* which is well documented. The silence of history in such a case amounts almost to proof that no such revisions were made. Kilpatrick's view that no systematic editing took place confirms this.

A particularly unfortunate thing about Hort's pos-

tulation of official revision(s) is that it has discouraged study of manuscripts of the Byzantine type, except for those which are in some way *uncharacteristic*. Such work as has been done shows that it is impossible to construct any sizeable sections of a Byzantine genealogical tree, examples of demonstrably related manuscripts being virtually non-existent. The idea that the Byzantine text had unrivalled dominance from the sixth to the sixteenth century is now known to be untrue.

Finally, Byzantine readings are in fact common in the early Fathers and they have also been turning up frequently in the very early papyri which have been discovered since Hort's day. Bit by bit, readings of this type have been creeping back into the critical texts of the New Testament. For instance, the United Bible Societies' text of 1966 is reckoned by the editors to be 80 per cent Westcott and Hort, 15 per cent *Textus Receptus* and 5 per cent other sources. H. A. Sturz has shown that many readings (some 150 in fact) which Hort regarded as purely Byzantine and therefore as late intrusions into the text have turned up in the papyri. There are over eighty of these papyri, dating mostly from the second to the fifth century.

The importance attached to the earliest manuscripts by the nineteenth-century critics was natural enough, but there was a tendency to overlook a significant fact, namely, that the survival of manuscripts is much influenced by climate. Egypt with its dry climate is by far the most likely place for manuscripts to survive. That Alexandria boasts the most ancient manuscripts may simply be due to climatic chance. Since, however, Alexandrian Christianity was untypical of the church as a whole, it could well be that its manuscripts are untypical of the textual tradition as a whole.

The great question is this: If there was no official revision which laid its stamp upon the great majority of manuscripts, how are we to explain the great diversity, yet relative homogeneity, of the traditional text? The only satisfactory answer seems to be that such homogeneity stems from an exceedingly early text—virtually, that is, from the autographs. This would have been the natural result of independent copying. Different copyists make different mistakes and different local editors make different judgements in their attempts to transmit a true text. But any one copyist or editor will transmit many more correct readings than he will faulty ones. Any particular wrong reading may be passed on, but usually only to a small minority of manuscripts, whereas the correct readings will usually be passed on to the great majority of manuscripts. This means that, although new variants will keep occurring with the passage of time, the *proportion* of manuscripts retaining the original reading at any time will almost always exceed by a large amount the proportion exhibiting an innovative reading.

It may well be that textual criticism's need is to give up its trust in B and %—and to search for the most primitive form of the Byzantine text. For those of us who have been brought up on Hort's theory, this will demand a complete intellectual somersault. Or, to put it more accurately it will demand that we stand on our heads to read our textual apparatus! It will

mean that the most despised symbol 'Byz' (the reading of the majority of Byzantine manuscripts) becomes a symbol of great respect, and that the most honoured symbols B and % become symbols of grave suspicion.

There are indeed a number of good reasons for such suspicion. Hort's predilection for these two manuscripts seems to have been based partly on his adherence to the maxim *lectio brevior potior*—the shorter reading is to be preferred. Both % and B frequently have short readings. If shorter readings are to be preferred, then % and B have a certain claim. But the maxim is quite dubious. Professor G. D. Kilpatrick told me that he considered *lectio longior potior* to be probably sounder. Bernard Orchard, who has copied out the Greek text of the four Gospels by hand three times, told me that his commonest mistake was inadvertent omission. P. M. Head, writing on scribal habits in the papyri says: 'omission is the more common scribal habit. If early scribes were more likely to omit words and phrases from their texts (for whatever reasons) it follows that we should not prefer the shorter reading, but rather prefer the longer reading (other factors being equal).'

Hort's reliance on these two manuscripts also sprang in fact from their age. They were the two earliest manuscripts available in his day which contained large sections of the New Testament, but, as we have seen, their survival may well be due to climatic factors more than anything else. The discovery of so many papyri since his day has fundamentally shifted the whole balance of the argument. Furthermore, the scribes of both these manuscripts are demonstrably careless and given at times to 'improving' rather than copying their exemplars.

### Recovery of the Best Byzantine Text

Two attempts have been made recently to recover the most ancient form of the Byzantine text. Both rely considerably on the researches of H. F. von Soden and his team, who made an attempt (running to nearly 3,000 pages) to classify the Byzantine manuscripts.

Z. C. Hodges and A. L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982) normally use von Soden to determine the number of manuscripts supporting a particular variant. If there is a clear majority in favour (60 per cent or more), that reading is adopted. If the number is fairly evenly divided, other criteria are used, as in conventional rational criticism. In the case of the Apocalypse the manuscripts tend to be evenly divided throughout, so the editors attempt to construct a genealogical tree and to use this guide in the choice of readings.

M. A. Robinson and W. G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek According to the Byzantine Majority Textform* (Atlanta: Original Word, 1991) believe that it is not possible to construct even this modest amount of genealogical tree, and they revert strictly to the principles of J. W. Burgon. This involves in part counting manuscripts, the presumption being (if other things are equal) that the older a reading is the greater is the number of its offspring

likely to be. This criterion of number is important, but it is always necessary to make sure that Burgon's other six principles are satisfied: antiquity, variety, continuity and respectability of witnesses and reasonableness of content and context.

The pro-Byzantine editors produce a text in which variant readings of importance are incomparably fewer than in the Hortian text. If they are right, this would mean that the great preoccupation with textual matters in modern New Testament study has largely been an unnecessary use of time and energy, as far as the recovery of the original text is concerned, and its results seriously misleading.

This is shown most clearly when the modern texts leave out two sizeable passages which appear in almost all Byzantine manuscripts—the last twelve verses of Mark and the account of the woman taken in adultery in John 7:53–8:11—and some hundreds of other words and phrases. The best Byzantine texts, however, are not entirely reflected in the *Textus Receptus* of Erasmus or the King James Version. The Robinson-Pierpont text gives no place to Luke 17:36; Acts 8:37; 15:34; 24:7 and parts of other verses, like the famous 1 John 5:7. This passage, which in the AV reads, 'For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one,' is demonstrably no part of the original Greek text. It first made its appearance in Latin, probably not before the fourth century. All told, both the Hodges-Farstad and the Robinson-Pierpont texts differ from the received text at some 1,500 places.

To claim for this text that it is an approximation to the original faces one weighty objection. If the original text was of the Byzantine type, why are there no examples of this text-type to be found in the authorities closest in time to the original? No papyrus, no codex earlier than Alexandrinus (fifth century), no writer earlier than Asterius (fourth century) exhibits this text—why not?

Robinson would argue that in the early part of her history the church suffered much persecution. Prior to the time of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, communication between the scattered branches of the church was often difficult and the church's sacred books were a particular target for the persecutor's zeal. The books were often kept hidden and were clandestinely copied by amateur copyists. This meant that many errors crept into the text and there were no authoritative manuscripts that could be used as standards to correct them by. These miscellaneous errors would have been entirely local in character and they would have left the greater part of any manuscript true to the original text. As communications improved and the standard of copying rose the local errors would be gradually noticed and eliminated and the original readings restored. Thus at any one time the original reading would have been far commoner than the local error. And so it has remained since, and therefore, seeing that we do not possess the materials to construct genealogical trees, our safest method is to examine the degree of manuscript support for and against a particular reading. If a variant is supported by a substantial (say more than 70 per cent) majority of the Greek manuscripts, that reading may be accepted with some

confidence as the original. This method effectively eliminates the subjective element of most text-critical speculation and restores external evidence to its position of primacy.

In these technical matters the layman may find it difficult to get his bearings. I myself incline strongly towards the Byzantine text, but its upholders need to expound the case more thoroughly and submit it to the rigorous scrutiny of the experts in the field. In any case it can be safely said that the Hort text on the one hand and the majority text on the other present rough limits beyond which the true text is not likely to be found. Should the Hort text prove to be right (which I consider most unlikely), it is still a text in which the truths of the faith continue to shine out with great clarity in spite of a penumbra of doubtful readings. It remains an effective channel for the Word of God. If, however, the Byzantine text is approximately correct the fringe of doubt has almost disappeared and the Christian has a marvellously solid text.

Even if we take the Hortian position and look through the possible variants, we soon find the importance of the factor of text entirely overshadowed by the far greater importance of the factor of the translators' interpretation. To put the matter concretely: We could take two modern translations of the Gospels (say the RSV and the NEB) and regard the one as the standard and the other as a variant text, and draw up a sort critical apparatus accordingly. The result would be one mass of variants, identical sentences being rarities. The differences would be many, many times greater than the differences between the two most dissimilar manuscripts that could be discovered among all the 5,000 known Greek manuscripts.

### The Contracting Area of Uncertainty

More than a century ago Guassen described in vivid terms the immense labour that had been expended by textual critics. He recalled how the young Bengel at the beginning of the eighteenth century had been perplexed by his inability to prove the integrity of the New Testament text, and had plunged himself into laborious researches, only to emerge with 'pious wonder and gratitude at the preservation of that text'. Guassen comments: 'Thus immense toil has ended in a result wonderful by its insignificance, and (shall I say) imposing by its nullity.' The toil has continued with undiminished vigour and, in spite of the distractions of the Westcott and Hort era, the area of doubt has continued to contract, and Guassen's comment is now truer than ever. His point has been expressed from a different angle in our day by E. R. Goodenough:

The field of lower criticism . . . was never so systematically cultivated as now. Yet . . . I doubt if the course of civilization will be appreciably changed by the production of the absolutely ideal New Testament text, or indeed would be deeply affected by the discovery of the complete set of New Testament autographs. I should imagine that if we had Paul's letter to the Romans in its original form

the problem of what he meant to say in it would be just about what it is now when we read it in Nestle's text. And the question of the relevance for modern man of whatever Paul may have said would certainly be exactly what it is.

### Ample Evidence, not absolute proof

There is, then, no absolute proof that our Canon is precisely the true Canon, and no absolute proof that any one word of the text is precisely as God gave it. But the quest for absolute proofs, whether historical or theological, is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of history, theology and the human mind. History is at best an approximation to truth based upon an incomplete inductive study of the facts. Theology is a fallible human attempt to co-ordinate the data of revelation. The human intellect, even when renewed by the Holy Spirit, cannot know with absolute certainty. In his inmost being the Christian believer has an absolute assurance (that is, an assurance which comes from God's direct witness within him) that he has heard the voice of God and that he is a child of God. But when he puts his beliefs into his own words the absoluteness of the truth of his statements vanishes. His every word lies open to the scrutiny of the probing philosopher, who may ask for definitions and amplifications, and who will soon prove to him that he does not know precisely what he does believe. But a conviction that is not absolute is not necessarily unreal. Conviction based on adequate evidence can be dynamic. There is good evidence that the Old Testament Canon was closed in Christ's day, and that he accredits all the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament to us. But the evidence for the canonicity of Ecclesiastes lacks the overwhelming force of that for books frequently quoted by Christ. Similarly, in the New Testament the evidence for 2 Peter is weaker than for the Gospels. Yet, in spite of this less solid fringe at the edges of the Canon, we can see God's care for the well-being of the church, in that the evidence of canonicity is strongest where it is most needed. The fiercest attacks of scepticism have been on the Old Testament, but it is the Old Testament which has the direct attestation of our Lord. And within the Old Testament the books most attacked are either those best attested (*e.g.* Pentateuch, Isaiah, Daniel, Jonah) or those least important from the point of revelation (*e.g.* Ecclesiastes, Canticles, Esther). Even these apparently unimportant books no one will be inclined lightly to discard when they have seen them put to such valuable use as J. S. Wright has put Ecclesiastes, or W. Vischer has put the Book of Esther.

### The Value of an Uncertainty Fringe

An uncertainty fringe of text or Canon may be a positive blessing, if it forces us to focus our attention upon the central truths of revelation. The guidance of revelation is sufficiently clear on vital matters, even if not entirely clear on less important matters. Augustine taught his readers to work outwards, from the universally acknowledged Scriptures to works of less

authority: 'The most intelligent investigator of Sacred Scriptures will be the man who has in the first place read them all . . . he may have some grasp . . . at least with respect to those which are called canonical Scriptures, therefore preferring those which are accepted by all Catholic Churches to those which some do not accept.' If this course is followed, and the Bible is treated as one whole, quite serious mistakes may do little harm. Even if the apocrypha is admitted to the fringe, it will be a long time before it does serious harm, provided weight is not placed on isolated texts that lack corroboration in the undoubted Scriptures. To omit the Epistle of James is to deprive oneself of a great delight, but it would not deprive one of any doctrine not taught clearly elsewhere in the Bible. Those who work from the centre outwards proceed safely, and they experience the joy of seeing more and more pieces that were once doubtful taking their place in the mosaic.

In the case of the text there is a similar fringe of uncertainty. It has been said that, since there is no need for guaranteed inerrancy now, there is no reason to suppose that inerrancy was ever given. (The so-called 'lost Princeton Bible' evoked great mirth.) But the distinction between the Scripture as it was originally given and the Scripture as it is now is not mere pedantry. We must hold, on the one hand, to the absolute truth of direct divine utterance. God does not approximately speak the truth. Human expositions of what God has said, on the other hand, do approximate to truth, and one can speak meaningfully of different degrees of approximation. If the term 'essential infallibility' is applied to a divine utterance, it has no precise meaning. It is like a medicine that is known to be adulterated, but adulterated to an unknown degree. When, however, 'essential infallibility' is referred to Scriptures once inerrant but now slightly corrupt, the meaning can, within limits, be precise. We know to a close approximation the nature of the tiny textual adulterations. The bottle is, as it were, plainly labelled: 'This mixture is guaranteed to contain less than 0.01% of impurities.' And our Lord himself (in the case of the Old Testament) has set us an example by taking his own medicine. A man's last will and testament is not invalidated by superficial scribal errors; no more are the divine testaments in the Bible.

It was evidently God's purpose to give us a Book of Truth, rich in its diversity of concrete, personal experience and rich in its variety of forms of instruction, to be studied minutely and yet comprehensively. Could anything be better calculated to encourage the careful study of Scripture down to its smallest details than the doctrine of inspiration? And could anything be better calculated to discourage us from resting our ultimate trust in details than the textual uncertainty fringe? In searching for the truth the slight element of uncertainty encourages us to compare Scripture with Scripture and to look always for the convergent testimony of the Bible as a whole. If God had altogether preserved the Bible from the ordinary corruptions of manuscript transmission, this purpose would actually have been served less well. Had the very autographs been preserved, they might well have become objects of idolatry. In any case, what

reason have we to think that we should be better equipped for good works if all the loose ends of our theology could be neatly tied?

So then, starting with belief in the incarnation and a very general belief in the historical truth of the Gospels, we have found ourselves apparently compelled to accept our Lord's view of Scripture. According to his teaching, God so guided the authors that the words they wrote were his words. We have seen that this applies not only to the Old Testament, but also in principle to the New. We have reason to believe that God guided the church in its recognition of the inspired books and that he preserved its text, so that down the centuries it might remain unimpaired as the vehicle of revelation.

We can adapt our conclusion concerning Jesus and the Old Testament and say:

To Christ the Bible is true, authoritative, inspired. To him the God of the Bible is the living God, and the teaching of the Bible is the teaching of the living God.

To him, what Scripture says, God says.

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### What is your view on this issue?

Evangel would welcome studied responses and will consider publication of the best replies.

As an initial response Bob Sheehan, author of 'Which Version' (published by Grace Publications) and pastor of the Evangelical Church, Welwyn, Herts, makes the following observations:

He notes, 'As the twentieth century draws to a close an increasing number of voices approaching textual issues from various angles have been arguing that the Majority/Byzantine text must be given more weight or total weight.'

In consideration of Wenham's thesis in the above article (which is clearly sympathetic to this view!) he suggests that it may be over-dependent on the views of Wilbur Pickering and G. D. Kilpatrick. He points out that 'The textual critic and Patristics expert, G. D. Fee has written a thorough critique of Pickering's

work' (Westminster Theological Journal, Spring 1979, pp. 397 ff.). Fee, he argues, suggests Pickering is inaccurate in his understanding of textual critical methodology, his understanding of the causes of textual corruption and his understanding and use of the church Fathers. In addition, says Fee, he shows a lack of first hand acquaintance with much of the primary data.

Sheehan also points out that Kilpatrick is regarded as something of a maverick in textual critical circles.

Sheehan adds that while he recognizes the fact that there is no evidence of revisions of the text (such as is usually argued to explain the emergence of the Byzantine text) Wenham may be only opting for another, equally unproven, theory; authoritative manuscripts which unspecified persons have used to correct erroneous readings.

Sheehan concludes that, 'It is difficult to see why the arguments for the superiority of the Byzantine text should be seen as compelling.'

# SALVATION IN CHRIST: A HANDBOOK FOR DISCIPLESHIP

Jon Zens

Evangel has always sought to provide a forum for creative and radical expressions of the call to discipleship. In this article, Jon Zens, editor of *Searching Together* (obtainable from Searching Together, PO Box 48, St. Croix Falls, WI 54024, USA) provides a outline guide for discipleship.

In John 5:39 Jesus said, 'The Scriptures bear witness of me.' Here he was referring to the Old Testament, Genesis through Malachi. When Moses wrote the

first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis through Deuteronomy), Jesus noted, 'He wrote about me' (John 5:46). After his resurrection, Jesus met two