The Text of the New Testament

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The New Testament

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CHAPTER I

THE OBJECT AND METHOD OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

One of the most necessary parts of the investigations of historians is to criticise the documents on which their researches are based, in order to be certain that the text which they are using really represents the original writing of the author. This criticism is usually known as Textual criticism, for the obvious reason that it deals with the text as opposed to the subject-matter. It is less commonly termed the Lower as opposed to the Higher criticism, which deals not with the text as written by the author or editor of the document in question, but with the sources and methods used by him in making the text. Thus Higher criticism approaches the subject at a point higher up the stream of its existence.

The object of all textual criticism is to recover so far as possible the actual words written by the writer. But in order to do this properly the critic has to explain how each successive deviation from the original came to be currently adopted, and frequently he finds the clue enabling him to do this in the history of some later period, which gives some reason for a textual variation. In these researches it sometimes happens that the discoveries of the textualist are of great value to the historian; for the corrupt reading of some important document often explains otherwise inexplicable phenomena in the history of ideas or the conduct of a controversy.

The problem, then, which faces the textual critic is to remove from a number of manuscripts of varying date the corruptions which have crept into the text and to
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assign to each variation its appropriate cause, thus obtaining in the end the original pure text.

Let us assume, then, what as a matter of fact is never more than approximately the case, that the critic has at his disposal all the known mss. of a given work. He begins his work knowing nothing about the character of the mss., and from them he has to find out and reconstruct the original text. His work falls into four stages, which in practice necessarily pass imperceptibly into each other, but which in theory are distinguishable, and ought not to be confused:

I. The study of each manuscript by itself, correcting obvious mistakes which are due to slips of the pen and cognate reasons, and such readings as seem clearly to be corrupt forms of other recorded readings.

II. A comparison of the manuscripts to which this process has been applied, and their arrangement into groups, according to similarities of reading, the rule being followed that, speaking generally, community of error implies community of origin. This process is carried on until all the known mss. have been put into groups, each with a presumably distinct ancestor or archetype.

III. These archetypes are then compared, and a provisional text is constructed out of them, the archetype of the archetypes being arrived at as closely as possible.

IV. This provisional text is finally subjected to the process known as conjectural emendation. That is, an attempt is made to explain and emend all the passages which still seem corrupt.

These four stages in the work of textual criticism call for a little fuller explanation.

I. The investigation of individual mss. and the detection of scribes’ mistakes or alterations demand the knowledge and application of the laws which obtain in these matters.
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The chief point to be remembered is that mistakes and corruptions are of two classes:—
1. Unintentional, due to natural error.
2. Intentional, due to a desire for improvement.

1. Unintentional alterations.—Many instances of this source of error are quite easy to detect and remedy; such, for example, are cases where a word or phrase is senselessly repeated twice, e.g. in the Latin of the Laudian ms. of Acts ii. 4 the scribe has written "et repleti sunt et repleti sunt omnes spiritu sancto," where the omission of the second "et repleti sunt" is an obvious and certain correction.

This is technically called dittography; similar causes of error are homoeoteleuton—the confusion of words ending in similar syllables; this cause often leads to the omission of a complete line of the archetype; haplography—writing a word once when it ought to be repeated, e.g. κῦρος for κῦρος, κῦρος; itaconism—strictly a tendency to replace other vowels by iota, but loosely used of other vowel changes. In later Greek ms. almost any vowel seems changeable for any other, nor does the same ms. always observe the same spelling, e.g. λέγεται is often spelt λέγετε; δηλον is written δηλο; οἰ γενεῖσε becomes οἰ γενεῖσε, and so on.

There are many other technical phrases for similar kinds of mistakes, most of which explain themselves. The important thing is that they classify to some extent the slips of the pen and misspellings of scribes. A slightly different form of error is where the scribe seems to have preserved the right order of letters, but produced the wrong word from them, e.g. in Col. ii. 18 we read ἐσθιότερον ἐμπορεύω, where a possible explanation of an otherwise hopeless passage is that an early scribe thus divided up ἀμωμενιμομορεύσω (altering ἐ to ε) instead of thus, ἀλήθεα κενομομορεύω, being deceived by the rarity of the word κενομομορεύω. It must, of course, be remembered that the earliest ms. have no accents or breathings.

A similar form of mistake is due to misunderstanding
of contracted words. A possible example of this is the curious reading in Matt. xxvii. 16, τίνα δελτη ἀπὸ τῶν δύο
διολόσω ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Βασιλεῖαν ἢ Ἰησοῦν κ.τ.λ. The usual
way of writing Ἰησοῦν is υ, i.e. the first and last letters.
It is suggested that the origin of the reading is that an
early scribe was guilty of ditography, and wrote ἡμῶν
for ἡμῖν, but saw his mistake and deleted the second υ
by dots—ι. This was taken for a contracted word by
some later reader—the more easily because Βασιλεῖας
seems to be a patronymic. (Such an explanation is, of
course, double-edged; the omission of υ can be explained
equally well as an example of haplography.)

It is very important to collect the examples of this
kind of mistake, not simply because their detection is
a first step towards the purifying of the text, but because
they are an important clue to the history of the manu-
script in which they occur. The more senseless the
mistake, the more important it sometimes is, e.g. in
Matt. xiii. 54, Cod. Sinaiticus reads εἶς τῷ ἐπταρτίῳ
for εἰς τῷ παρπίᾳ, where Dr. Rendel Harris has pointed
out that this is a clue to the birthplace of the ms., just
as we might imagine an Oxford scribe of Shakespeare
writing—

"I come to 'Banbury' Caesar" for 'bury' Caesar,

and mistakes in spelling, especially if repeated, often
give a hint as to the pronunciation, and so nationality,
of the scribe. For example, if a scribe of early date
is found to write consistently 'michi' for 'mihi,' it is
probable that he is a Saxon.

All these forms of mistake and similar ones are fairly
easy to detect, and their classification is the first thing
that a critic has to do. Some of them, such as dittos
graphs, are obvious at once, others are only recognised
when several other ms. have been seen, and a roughly
provisional text exists at least in the mind of the critic.
It must, however, be remembered that great caution is
required in deciding whether a reading is certainly
腐upt or only possibly so. And the critic has always
to be ready to revise his judgment. He ought always
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...to be suspicious of readings, but far more suspicious of his own conclusions.

2. Intentional alterations.—As was said, these are due to a desire to improve the text, either because the archetype had an obvious mistake, which the scribe wished to emend, or because he wished to simplify a difficulty. It is clear that often a scribe made an easier text than the original, and therefore one rule of criticism is that when two variant readings are obviously connected with one another, the more difficult is to be preferred.

It would be a profitless task to attempt to classify the possible causes of intentional alteration. But some of those which especially affect the New Testament text are:

(a) The influence of translations known to the scribe.
   This is especially the case with bilingual mss.,\(^1\) which are Greek in one column and Latin in the next. The texts of the Greek and Latin in these cases are almost always accommodated to each other, partly in order to have as little divergence of reading as possible, partly for the mechanical reason of wishing to keep one line of Greek equal to one line of Latin. As it must have often happened that unilingual mss. were made by copying the appropriate column of a bilingual ms., it will be seen that the influence of translations has always to be remembered.

(b) A cognate cause is the influence of harmonies,\(^2\) or even the study of the comparison of the four Gospels. This inevitably led to a tendency to assimilate the Gospels to one another, and to remove discrepancies and contradictions.

(c) It is probable, though not certain, that dogmatic reasons may have caused alterations. It is known

\(^1\) As will be seen, there are some critics who believe that the oldest form of the Latin version was bilingual, and possibly even interlinear. Bilingual mss. are not only Grco-Latin, there are also examples of Grco-Thebaic and Grco-Arabic.

\(^2\) i.e. texts in which one continuous narrative is made by compilation from the four Gospels.