

Textual Criticism (Lower Criticism) and the Bible

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Knowledge empowers a person. Absent oppressive power, I can not think of an example where a person of lesser knowledge can take advantage of one possessing greater knowledge. One of my goals is to spiritually empower my audience. Accurate knowledge *is critical* to this endeavor. “*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2Pet 3:18). Knowledge is foundational even to grace. How can you grow in grace if you do not ... **know** ... what it is?

For some of you, the forthcoming information will be quite threatening. Your first impulse will be to return to a simpler, more secure position. Well, there are two problems with such a retreat. First, our God is the God of truth. Where truth is - God is. As His children, truth strengthens us. This applies to science, math, history ... or textual criticism. Second, I believe you can handle the truth. At least that is how I intend on interacting with you. Otherwise, I would be babying you. While we all start out as babies (born again), it is not God’s design we stay babies. Physically, a baby is cute, but at four, eight, or twelve years old - if still a baby - cuteness is now tragedy.

The only food Christians grow by ... is truth.

So, let’s talk about the Bible. If you have one handy, pick it up. As you look at it, you already know that you do not possess the original writings of Moses, Isaiah, Paul, etc. You have some sort of copy. Actually, all the original documents disintegrated long ago. Theologically speaking, there are no extant (original) texts. Today, we possess copies ... of copies. Did you know the oldest existing New Testament papyri fragments date at about 200 AD? And substantial manuscripts start around 325 AD! One can only guess how many times removed all these are from the original writings. But, your Bible has another complicating factor. Unless it is written in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic or Koine Greek, you have ... *a translation* ... of one of these copies. I discuss this translation complication in, “*Translations and the Bible.*” So, ... the book in your hand is quite far removed from original Biblical documents.

The Original Texts

Every physical thing in this present environment decays - including the Bible. Papyri, leather, and paper all decay. Fortunately, over the centuries, various groups have been very interested in these documents. As old copies wore out, new ones were made. These groups, or “*schools,*” were separated by culture, distance, geopolitical realities ... and time. In the last 150 years or so, technologies have made the world “*smaller.*” Bible text investigators have been able to compare copies from various locales in great detail. The study of these copies is called Textual Criticism (or Lower Criticism). I am very grateful for copies. Because of them, I have a Bible.

Don’t Panic ...

But, copies have presented ... some complications. For now, let’s just address the New Testament materials. As copies have been compared against each other, differences have surfaced. For example, seven verses into Matthew, some copies read, “*Asaph*” - but others, “*Asa.*” Both are not correct. The letter, “*phi,*” was either in the original text ... or it wasn’t. These differences are called “*variants*” - thus creating “*variant readings.*” Sometimes, like the example above, only *one letter* is different. But, sometimes *a whole word* is different ... or *a whole phrase* ... or *an entire passage* (i.e., Mk 16:9-20, Jn 7:53 - 8:11, or 1Jn 5:8). At the time of this writing there are at least 2,086 fairly

significant variations between Greek texts (copies) for the New Testament alone. As other copies are discovered ... that number can only increase.

I Repeat ... Do Not Panic

Textual Critics believe “*all scripture is God-breathed*” (2Tim 3:16). I am also of this persuasion. But, the Bible does not say, “*All copies of scripture are God-breathed ...*”. When Matthew finished his account, that document was absolutely flawless. The same is true of Mark’s work, and Luke’s and John’s. The ink dried on God-breathed, perfect documents. So also Paul’s letters, and Peter’s and James’ and Moses’ and ... well, you get the picture. Textual criticism’s sole goal is to determine what the original documents said.

General Procedures

When examining variant readings, Textual Critics begin with simple observation - and, if needed, move to the more complex. Sometimes, copyists obviously just made a simple error - i.e., their eye skipped a line. But, other variants are clearly *intentional*. This has caused Textual Critics to develop several “*rules of thumb*.” For example, it is of first importance to know from which “*school*” a copy has come. Why is that? Well, as critics have studied all the texts, it has become apparent that some “*schools*” were *meticulous copiers* ... while others wanted to “*smooth out*” problematic texts. Those copyists added words, phrases ... and even changed words to an easier vocabulary. Quite often, these alterations also better supported some pet doctrine or practice ... to no one’s surprise. So, ... *a single copy* from a meticulous school carries more weight than *a hundred copies* from a “*liberal*” school. And this holds true even if the hundred copies *are older!* Age and/or superior numbers does not outweigh location.

Another rule of thumb: Textual Critics often defer to *shorter readings*, and also *the more difficult of readings* (whether in vocabulary or syntax). The reasons behind deliberate text changes is a sub-study in itself. In that exercise, each variant must be studied in its own individual circumstance.

Textual Criticism is a science ... and an art. Once these critics have examined and debated the pros and cons of each variant, they forward what they believe to be the original text. Sometimes they feel quite certain of their deductions and analysis - and sometimes they just give it their best guess. One group (affiliated with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research) uses a rating system from “A” (feel sure), to “D” (best guess). Textual Criticism is an extremely important, and interesting, field of study. As I write this, I almost wish I had been able to devote my life to it. But, by the grace of God, I am who I am - and I am where I am.

And Consider This

The original New Testament letters were written ... *to be used!* They were not stashed in a glass case in a museum. My personal Bible has had *one user* for 20+ (now 40+) years and it’s falling apart. But, if in the hands of an entire congregation, it probably wouldn’t last 5 years. And when Paul’s letters were delivered to the carnal Corinthians ... do you think they knew what was in their hands? I wonder how those original letters were treated? Some of those Corinthians surely wanted to crumple them up and throw them away! My point? By the time someone may have realized a next generation copy needed to be made, the present document may have had tears, smudges, partially illegible parts - or even some missing chunks. As we speak, I just reexamined my personal Bible. The first two pages of Genesis are missing some text in the bottom left corner. To recopy this, I would need to do so from memory if no other copy was around.

Speaking of Genesis, do you think copies of it might contain some textual variants? What about the rest of the Old Testament? Malachi is 500 years older than any of the New Testament writings.

The Bottom Line

So, how has the study of Textual Criticism affected me? Well, I could say, “*The closer I scrutinize the Word of God, and study these variant readings, the stronger my faith becomes.*” I could then add, “*My confidence in God’s Word has not been shaken at any time - in any way - by this study. Textual Criticism has even strengthened my faith and witness in innumerable ways.*” Yes, ... I could make such claims. But, how would you know if such claims *were true*? Maybe my confidence in the Bible *has been* shaken to the core. Maybe I *am trying* to convince myself, “*everything is okay*” - yet, behind a brave front ... chaos, confusion, skepticism, and spiritual shipwreck is lurking. Well, this latter situation could be the reality ... except for one thing. Earlier I said, “*Our God is the God of truth. Where truth is - God is.*” (actually the Bible declares this - Ps 31:5). Well, the truth is ... there are **no** original Bible documents ... and there are **variants** in existing copies. And, ... guess what? Sure enough, God is there. He is *always* where the truth is. He has indeed used the study of Textual Criticism as a catalyst - steeling my faith and confidence in His Word. I love the study of Textual Criticism. For me, it has made the Bible ... even more rock solid. Truth always ends that way.

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