

Modern Textual Criticism: A House Built Upon Sand

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Soli Deo Gloria!

“And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7:26-27)

The issue of the correct Biblical text (in the original languages) is not a trivial or peripheral matter; since it involves the very words of God, it is a matter of supreme importance (cf. Psalm 138:2). For this reason, the Bible-believing Christian needs to be aware of the tenets and presuppositions being employed by scholars today under the scientific banner of modern textual criticism, which has resulted in a seemingly never-ending process of continually revising the text of Scripture. It is yet another example of men practicing “science falsely so called” (1 Timothy 5:20), “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

Many of the tenets of modern textual criticism are simply unreasonable. For example, *brevior lectio potior*—the shorter reading is to be preferred; isn’t it more reasonable to believe a textual variant was introduced by a copyist who inadvertently left out a phrase or a verse of Scripture, rather than to believe he inserted additional text? Or *proclivi lectioni praestat ardua*—the harder reading is to be preferred; but isn’t it more reasonable to believe that God, who is the author of language and who inspired the words of Scripture for the purpose of communication, is capable of communicating clearly?

Unreasonable tenets such as these are confusing to the Bible believer, but much more disturbing is the fact that the most central among them are outright unbiblical. By this is meant the foundational presupposition (along with its immediate corollary), from which modern textual critics reason their way to a conclusion about which reading among multiple variants is most likely to be authentic, is in conflict with the clear and infallible

testimony of God in His Word. This major presupposition of modern textual criticism, and its corollary, are: 1) the transmission of the text of Scripture, from the original autographs to the manuscript copies extant today, was an entirely naturalistic process; and 2) textual variants evident in the manuscript copies are a result of unintended copyist errors and not deliberate corruption introduced for theological reasons.

These presuppositions were introduced into the science of textual criticism by Fenton John Anthony Hort, the father of the modern theory. He asserted that, “The principles of criticism explained in the foregoing section [of his book, B. F. Wescott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*] hold good for all ancient texts preserved in a plurality of documents. In dealing with the text of the New Testament no new principle whatever is needed or legitimate”. That is, the presupposition of godless naturalism is to be applied to the transmission of the text of Scripture, such that it is to be treated like any other book of antiquity. However, no other book of antiquity was inspired by God, and no other book has His promise of preservation. “The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, **O Lord, thou shalt preserve them** from this generation **forever**” (Psalm 12:6-7).

Hort went on to conclude that “there are no signs of deliberate falsification of the text for dogmatic purposes”. This conclusion is laughable. It flies in the face of the testimony of Scripture itself, for the Apostle Paul asserted that “**many . . . corrupt the word of God**” (2 Corinthians 2:17), which occurs in a passage of Scripture in which the “devices” of “Satan” are the subject of discussion (2 Corinthians 2:11). If “many” were corrupting the text of the New Testament in the middle of the 1st century, the presupposition that manuscripts allegedly dated to the 4th century (e.g., Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) contain readings that are closer to the original autographs solely because of their supposed antiquity is shown to be not only without merit, but unbiblical at its core.

The testimony of Scripture is that Satanically-motivated men began to corrupt the text of the New Testament from the very time it was recorded, but that the promise of God ensures that “[His] words shall not pass away” (Matthew 25:35). Since modern textual

criticism at its foundation rejects this testimony of Scripture, it is like a house built upon the sand by a foolish man, and great will be the fall of it (Matthew 7:26-27).