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How to use a Greek New Testament

by

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We have to bring the Word of God to all the peoples of the world. But we can bring it only in human forms. To do so we must have a Greek Testament text. Much in it is the work of human scholars who have edited the text so that we can read it.

Divisions of Text

First of all, our modern division into chapters and verses is a relatively late invention. The verse division was first introduced by the French printer, Robert Stephanus, in 1551; the chapter divisions originated in the 13th century. In the old manuscripts there were other divisions into little sections. To find the parallel passages in the other Gospels, the famous Eusebius of Caesarea (4th cent.) invented an ingenious system of "sections" and "canons" reprinted in many of our printed editions (e.g. in the Stuttgart (Nestle) edition in the inner margin). But one is often in doubt as to just where a new section is required by the sense, especially in the Epistles. Important differences are noted in the Stuttgart (Nestle) apparatus.

Word Division

The word division, too, is not original. The oldest manuscript Bibles, like other ancient books, were written in *scriptio continua* that is, without any space between the words. So, in many cases, we are in doubt as to the intended word division. For example, in Mat. 20 : 23, "to sit on my right or left hand is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them, for whom it is prepared by my Father", is in Greek: *all (h)ois*; but this can be also read: *allois*, that is "to others it is prepared". This is the reading in a late Greek and an Old Latin manuscript. Or in 1 Cor. 16 : 22 we find *maranatha*. It was usual to read: *maran atha*, which is the Aramaic for "Our Lord has come". But perhaps it is better to divide: *marana tha* "Our Lord, come!", like Rev. 22 : 20.

Punctuation

The oldest manuscripts had almost no punctuation. Many ambiguous passages were discussed by the Greek Fathers, e.g. John 1 : 3-4, where

the words *ho gegonen* are taken with the preceding words by Irenaeus and Origen, but with the following by Chrysostom. Similar problems exist in such verses as John 7 : 38 and Rom. 9 : 5. There are still other passages where the modern editor may take his conjectures, e.g. after John 12 : 27 "save me from this hour": should he print a period or a question mark? Such differences also are often noted in the Nestle apparatus.

Accents

Then again the oldest manuscripts had no accents. In Heb. 10 : 14 *mia prosphora* "one offering", dative or nominative? J. A. Bengel conjectured the latter. A similar difficulty occurs in John 5 : 2. Furthermore, the whole text was written in capitals. In Luke 16 : 8 we can read "the lord" i.e. (of the steward), or "the Lord" i.e. (Jesus). In Phil. 4 : 3 is *sunzuge* "yoke fellow" an appellative or a proper-name? Just so in 2 John 1, is *eklektê* to be translated "chosen" or to be interpreted as *Eklekte*, a proper name?

In all these cases ancient and modern scholars had to decide what was originally meant. Sometimes we have help from the old versions (the oldest are in Latin and in Syriac). From these we can see how their translators understood the Greek text.

Problems of Textual Readings

All these matters do not concern the actual letters in the old Greek Bibles, but only their interpretation. But how is it with those readings themselves?

The originals, written by the Apostles themselves, are all lost; and there is no hope of finding them one day. They were written not on vellum (parchment), as in later times when under Constantine the Church was favored by the Roman Empire, but on cheap papyrus; and papyrus decays in wet soil like our ordinary paper. Only in Egypt (and some other desert places) papyri were found from a time long before Christ, and many original private letters were found from His time. But St. Paul did not write to Egypt. In 1935 C. H. Roberts published "an unpublished fragment of the fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library" (Manchester, England) which is a little scrap of papyrus (numbered in the international list of N.T. papyri as P⁵²) containing some verses from John 18, written probably about AD 125. It is the oldest piece of the N.T., but even it is not original, for St. John did not write his Gospel and send it to Egypt.

The Reasons for Differences of Text

Therefore, we have only copies of the Biblical writings, and copies of copies, and copies of copies of copies, etc. And we all know what often happens in copying: errors, misunderstandings, omissions, etc. creep into the copy; then intentional alterations: obsolete terms are replaced by modern ones (as in our Hymnbooks); additions, little explanations in the margin are inserted in the text by a later copyist; the text of the second or third Gospel was adapted to the first (harmonization); difficult passages were smoothed, etc.

History of the Textus Receptus

Since Gutenberg's invention of printing with moveable type, matters have been better; the copies of the same printed edition do not differ from another. But the first published Greek New Testament, that prepared by Erasmus, 1516, was quite different from the first written manuscripts, because Erasmus utilized only a few late manuscripts. For the book of Revelation he had only one manuscript, and it lacked a page at the end! So he retranslated the missing verses himself from the Latin version into the Greek. Again in Rev. 17: 8 he could not read the manuscript with certainty (the manuscript still exists) and printed *kaiper estin* (against the rules of Greek grammar) instead of *kai parestin*. And this text which was printed and reprinted came later to be designated as the *Textus Receptus*, the generally accepted text. From this text the King James or Authorized Version was translated as well as Luther's German translation. Even as late as 1734 the famous German Bible scholar, J. A. Bengel, did not dare to alter the text but added only in the margin of his Greek N.T. what seemed to him to be the better variant readings.

The Discovery of Ancient Manuscripts

Soon the scholars searched for more and older and (therefore generally) better manuscripts, and these were accurately collated and all their variations noted. John Mill (1645—1707) collected in the Apparatus of his critical edition about 30,000 variant readings.

In the 19th century Professor Tischendorf of Leipzig discovered in the monastery on Mt. Sinai the famous manuscript of nearly the whole Greek Bible, conveniently named the Codex Sinaiticus (since 1933 it has been in the British Museum), written about A.D. 400. At the same time new attention was paid to the other famous manuscript in the Library of the Vatican at Rome (cod. graec. 1209 usually called by theologians the "Codex Vaticanus") which is perhaps even a little older than the Sinaiticus.

Scholarly Texts of the New Testament

Tischendorf in his "editio octava critica maior" (eighth Edition) 1869-1872, based his text especially on his Codex Sinaiticus and collected in the critical apparatus all the variant readings of Greek manuscripts then known (also readings from the old versions and the citations of the Fathers). After his death C. R. Gregory edited the Prolegomena in a thick volume (1894). The edition of Tischendorf is still useful today.

In England after a long preparation (first a confidential edition was printed in 1871) B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort published *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 1881. They relied especially on the Codex Vaticanus and were convinced that in it they had the oldest "neutral" text, from which the other forms in the later manuscripts developed. Nearly equal variant readings they gave in the margin, while in the appendix of the second volume of their edition they discussed with profound scholarship other "rejected noteworthy readings" of the other manuscripts, and gave a full history of the development of the text. They called especial attention to the so-called "Western"

text, represented mainly by the Greek-Latin Codex Cantabrigiensis (or Codex Bezae, because in the 16th century it was in the possession of Theodore Beza, the friend of Calvin). Their judgment on noteworthy rejected or suspected readings is always noted in the apparatus of "Nestle Text".

History of the Nestle Text

To make available in a cheap pocket-edition for each student and clergyman the results of these great and expensive editions, my father, Eberhard Nestle (1851-1913) edited in 1898 his *Novum Testamentum Graece* for the Bible Society of Stuttgart; he compared word by word the editions of Tischendorf and Westcott-Hort; and in order to secure a majority, where they differ, he used first the "Resultant Greek Testament" of Weymouth (1886), and then, after its completion, the edition of Bernhard Weiss (1894-1900), and put in the text the reading of the majority. Where all three differ, he used the "middle" reading and gave the variants in the critical apparatus. As a result, he did not produce a subjective text based on his individual judgment, but in so far as possible the objective result of the great scholars of the 19th century. But knowing well that there were still other important readings, he gave a selection of these, in a second series of notes, especially from the Codex Bezae (or D as its siglum is in the list of codices; like B = Vaticanus and Aleph = Sinaiticus). The number of these secondary readings was increased in every new edition. My father had great joy that the text of the Stuttgart edition instead of the old *Textus Receptus* was accepted also by the British and Foreign Bible Society at their centenary in 1904. He planned to revise the edition when the long expected great edition by Hermann von Soden should be published; but he died in 1913, before von Soden's text was ready in the same year. Acquainted with his work since my youth, I was commissioned by the Stuttgart Bible Society to continue his edition. I was able to do it with the help of many scholars, especially of Prof. P. W. Schmiedel of Zürich (died 1935) and many others.

The von Soden Text

Since 1900 much work has been done on the textual criticism of the N.T. First there was the great work of von Soden (and his co-workers). He proposed to collect and to classify all the textual material and then to restore the original text. He classified the manuscripts into three great groups (recensions): (1) the Egyptian type; he designated it as H, Hesychian, according to Hieronymus, who cites an Old Testament scholar Hesychius. This group is in the main represented by Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (and others including the old Egyptian version). (2) The second, which was also already a well-known recension, he designated as K (= Koine or Konstantinople text). It is represented by the mass of the later manuscripts which led to the *Textus Receptus*. (3) The rest he combined into a third group. J (= Jerusalem text). Where two of these groups agree, he took it as the original text (his edition has the title *Die Schriften des N.T. in ihrer ursprünglichen Textgestalt*). In his

apparatus he gave a first class of variants, which he regarded as nearly equal to the text; in a second series, the most important others; in a third, individual errors or curiosities of single manuscripts.

But most of the N.T. scholars did not agree with von Soden. Not only did they doubt the possibility of reconstructing the original text by a mechanical voting; but they also held that it must be sought by an eclectic method. They agreed that von Soden had the merit of having classified especially the sub-groups of "K" (he took as a guide their variants in John 7 : 53 ff.). But they say that he combined two different testimonies in his J recension. It is not possible to combine the Western Text of cod. D and its allies with the Koridethi-codex (Theta), the family 1, family 13, and other minuscules (later codices written in little cursive letters, not in the capitals of the older codices or "uncials"). The latter, as Kirsopp Lake, Streeter, and others have said, belong to another group, as the text of Caesarea (in Palestine), where Origen, the greatest early Christian Bible scholar, worked in the beginning of the third century.

The History of Textual Differences

So we know, in the first centuries, i.e. before Constantine assembled the bishops of the whole empire at Nicaea in 325, each part of the church, each province, had its own life and therefore its own Bible text; nearly the same as in Germany where each regional church has its own Hymnbook and only now for the first time is a uniform book in preparation. Jerome, in his revision of the Latin Bible, mourned *tot paene versiones, quot codices* "nearly as much versions as manuscripts" (For a fine survey of these differences, see the great edition of Adolf Juelicher, edited after his death by W. Matzkow: *Itala. Das N.T. in altlateinischer Ueberlieferung*"; so far only Matthew has been published in 1938 and Mark in 1940.)

Likewise we have to deal with many differences between the Greek "local texts" of the New Testament. For the text of the N.T. from its beginning was not at once "Holy Scripture". The Bible of earliest Christianity was the Old Testament; the writings of our N.T. were "memoirs of the apostles" as Justin (about A.D. 150) calls them, or "the epistles of the saint man Paul", as the martyrs of Scili (A.D. 180), say. They were not copied first in offices of learned scribes as the Greek and Latin Classics, but by the zeal of the individual Christians or congregations. For example, we have in P¹³ fragments of Heb. 2—12 written on the back of a Latin excerpt from Livy.

Importance of the Papyri

Of special importance today are the papyri. From the first discoveries in Egypt among pagan literary texts, private letters, contracts, bills, etc. also little fragments of Biblical text were found. Mostly their text agreed with Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, also written in Egypt; but several of the papyri were older, from the 3rd or 4th century. In 1926-27 H. A. Sanders (Ann Arbor, Michigan) published two fragments, P³⁷ (3rd cent.), containing Mat. 26 : 19-32, and P³⁸ (3rd or 4th cent.),

containing parts of Acts 18 and 19. The latter agrees completely with the "Western" text, showing that this form of the text (mainly represented by Cod. Bezae, with many curious singularities) could not any longer be named "Western" for apart from the fact that the Old Syriac version of the Gospels agrees to a great extent with it, we now know that it was also widespread in Egypt at a time before the "great uncials" Vaticanus and Sinaiticus were written. Therefore it is better to call it an "unrecensioned" (or "pre-recension") text. But was it the oldest, the original one everywhere? We must ask this question in view of the great discoveries of 1930-31. At that time A. Chester Beatty bought at Cairo great fragments of papyrus-books, found probably by fellahin in the ruins of an old monastery. They include P⁴⁵ (3rd cent.) which contains on 30 leaf fragments about one-seventh of the Gospels and Acts; P⁴⁶ (written about A.D. 200 or a little later), part of which was also acquired by H. A. Sanders, contains on 86 leaves the Pauline Epistles from Rom. 5 to 1 Thes. 5 (the Epistle to the Hebrews is between Rom. and 1 Cor.); P⁴⁷ (3rd cent.) contains about one third of Revelation (ch. 9-17). (Further fragments of the O.T. in Greek were also discovered.) Their text shows many agreements with Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, but also with other groups (Caesarean), but not much with "Western".

Extent of Textual Variation

The New Testament textual critic has no uniform text before his eyes. The differences, however, ought not to be exaggerated. It is true that the number of variants of all manuscripts (we have still about 2500 Greek codices!) is estimated at 250,000 to 300,000 — more than the words in the N.T.! But we need not be afraid; most of these are of no importance (e.g. "Jesus says (said, has said) to them (to the disciples, to his disciples)"; or Rev. 22 : 21: "The grace of our Lord (of our Lord Jesus, of our Lord Jesus Christ) be with you (with all, with you all, with us, with us all, with the saints, with all saints)" etc., etc. Westcott and Hort said that about seven-eighths of the text is well attested by the old manuscripts (e.g. the omission of 1 John 5 : 7-8, the Comma Johanneum); of the rest we are not so sure, but only one-sixtieth of the text has differences of special interest, which must be carefully investigated. Here the critic must select what seems to be the best text, i.e. of best attestation and of best sense (but sometimes "hard" passages are older than a "smoothed" one). The great papyrus-codices as well as the little fragments show which of the later parchment-codices have a good "ancestry". Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are not the oldest "neutral" text, as Westcott and Hort supposed before the papyri had been found; they are the result of the recension of a Christian scholar of the 4th century. But it was a very good recension, as far as we can say today. But sometimes the Bible student must look also for other testimonies, and must consider that each manuscript has its individual scribal errors.

Various Scholarly Editions of the N.T.

The "Nestle" edition, based on the investigation of the 19th century but in its apparatus offering all the important new testimonies, may be

used also in the future. It should not, however, be regarded as an infallible representative of the original text; the apparatus must always be used also. (The 20th edition appeared in the autumn of 1950, Greek and Greek-Latin.).

After von Soden's death in 1913, a British committee was formed to make a "new Tischendorf", that is, to collect all the variants from all old and newly discovered testimonies of manuscripts, versions and Fathers. Edited by S. C. E. Legg, Mark was published in 1935 and Matthew in 1940. It is not to be continued in that form, but a new committee of scholars in U.S.A. (Chicago) and Europe (Oxford) will again take over the great task.

In the meantime we must concern ourselves with the pocket editions. In 1910 Alexander Souter (Oxford) published his *Novum Testamentum Graece*. His text is that of the English Revisers of 1881, very similar to that of Westcott and Hort. In the apparatus he gives only a few, but important, variants, with a very complete list of testimonies. His edition was reprinted several times and in 1947 was revised along the same lines.

H. J. Vogels, Professor of Catholic Theology at Bonn-Rhine, edited first a Greek N.T. in 1920; later also a Greek-Latin N.T., the 3rd edition of which was published in two parts in 1949-1950. The text does not differ much from Souter or Nestle; in the apparatus he gives especially, but not exclusively, the Latin and Syriac tradition.

In Spain J. M. Bover, S.J., published in 1943 his *Novi Testamenti Biblia Graeca et Latina*, in which he collated the usual printed editions since Tischendorf. In the apparatus he gives only the variants of their texts, so that we seek in vain the interesting variants of Codex Bezae and others.

Another Greek-Latin N.T. was published by August Merk, S.J., at Rome in 1933; the 6th edition appeared after his death and was published by S. Lyonnet, S. J. in 1948. The text differs slightly from Nestle, tending to the tradition of the Vulgate and the "Koine" text. In the apparatus he gives as compressed as possible a relatively large number of variants with full attestation. But he makes no attempt to give other possibilities of punctuation or conjectures of modern scholars at difficult passages as Nestle does.

So much work has been done to give a survey of the history of the text of the N.T. and the approach to the original text.¹ No edition, J. A. Bengel says, is so bad that we could not find in it what we are needing for our souls; but it is our duty to look for the oldest and best wording. And so the work on the outer clothing of the Divine Word may help us to an ever new comprehension of its inner value.

¹ Whoever wishes to read further on the Textual Criticism of the N.T. may consult the works of Sir Frederick G. Kenyon: *Recent Developments in the Textual Criticism of the Greek Bible*, London, 1933; *The Text of the Greek Bible*, 1937; *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 1939; *The Story of the Bible*, 1947; or the book of Kirsopp Lake, *The Text of the N.T.* 1928. In German: Eberh. Nestle, *Einführung in das Griech. N.T.*, 4. Aufl., bearbeitet von Ed. von Dobschuetz, 1923; H. J. Vogels, *Handbuch der N.T. lichen Textkritik*, 1923. In French: L. Vaganay, *Initiation à la critique textuelle néotestamentaire*, Lyon, 1934; M. J. Lagrange, *Introduction à l'étude du N.T.*, Paris, 1935.