

NOTES

THE "HARDER READING" IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dr. Nida's article under this title in the January 1981 issue is greatly to be welcomed because it draws attention to one of the commonest causes of corruption in texts (not only of the New Testament), namely the inveterate tendency of copyists to substitute the familiar and intelligible for the unusual or bizarre.

It does not follow that the harder reading must always be preferred; otherwise we should have to accept every scribal blunder that makes nonsense of the text. A striking example of this is to be found in Luke 14.5, where the best manuscripts mostly have "If any of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well, would you not pull him out at once even on the Sabbath day?" But there is good manuscript authority for the substitution of "ass" for "son". The two words are similar in Greek. It is difficult to believe that Luke wrote "son", because it destroys the force of the argument. Jesus was saying: "If it is legitimate to save the life of an animal on the Sabbath, much more is it legitimate to save the life of a human being." Of course if it was the case that Luke was so insensitive as to write "son", copyists would by under strong temptation to improve the logic by substituting an animal: but it is much more likely that an early copyist carelessly substituted "son" for "ass" (*uios* for *onos*), not realizing that this was out of context. "Ass" is preferred by the New English Bible. The better manuscripts are not invariably right.

At the top of page 102 Dr. Nida points out that the easier reading at Mark 1.2 is "even as it is written in the prophets", but our oldest and most trustworthy manuscripts have "in the prophet Isaiah", which is less accurate (because the quotation is partly from Malachi, partly from Isaiah), but is more likely to have been what Mark wrote. This however raises the question what should be the correct reading in Matthew 13.34, where some early manuscripts have "by the prophet Isaiah", but the greater weight of manuscript testimony has simply "by the prophet". The quotation is in fact from Psalm 78, so the reference to Isaiah is the "harder reading". It does not follow, however, that it must be regarded as genuine. It may have been due to some scribe who did not know where the quotation came from but thought that if it was from a prophet the name of a prophet ought to be specified, as in 12.14. The same thing happened at Matthew 2.5 where a few witnesses (correctly) specify that Isaiah was the source of the quotation, and in Matthew 21.4 where a few witnesses specify Isaiah or Zechariah as the source of a composite quotation from both prophets.

The example near the foot of page 103 is so instructive that it is worth more extended consideration.

(1) At Mark 6.22 the better manuscripts have a text of which the natural translation is: "His daughter Herodias came in and danced". (The Greek will not really bear the forced interpretation "his daughter by Herodias", though this is adopted by the Translator's New Testament.)

(2) Other manuscripts have a different text, the meaning of which is not altogether clear. It can be translated in three different ways: (a) "The daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced" (but why this heavy emphasis on

Herodias? The Jerusalem Bible has “the daughter of this same Herodias”, but this does not quite get the force of the Greek). (b) “Her daughter Herodias came in and danced” (i.e. mother and daughter had the same name; but this reads awkwardly because the mother has not been mentioned in the two preceding sentences). (c) It can be an Aramaic way of saying “Her daughter, that is to say Herodias’s, came in and danced.”

Now which of these two texts is “the harder reading?” Both have their difficulties. If we accept reading (1) we assume that Mark made the double error of supposing that the girl was Herod’s daughter and that her name was Herodias, and that an early editor altered the text in order to correct these mistakes. But this is not a satisfactory explanation because the rest of the story is told on the assumption that the girl was not Herod’s daughter. He had evidently never seen her dance before and was captivated by the novelty. A man does not suddenly offer his own daughter anything up to half his kingdom. It was to her mother that the girl turned for advice, and it was to her mother that she gave the Baptist’s head. To make sense, the story demands that at verse 22 the girl be introduced as the daughter of Herodias, not Herod. To call her Herod’s daughter conflicts so violently with the context that for this reason alone it is difficult to believe this is what Mark wrote, quite apart from the errors of fact in an otherwise well-informed narrative. And if reading (2) is the work of an early editor, why did he express himself in such awkward Greek? We are therefore driven to accept the alternative text as original. This also is a hard reading, because of the awkwardness of the Greek, and it is not at all unlikely that an early copyist, not appreciating the force of the Aramaism (version (c) above), altered the Greek to something more intelligible, without realizing that he had ruined the story and made two historical blunders. Whichever text we adopt, we can see the alternative as an attempt by an early copyist to remove a difficulty.

One other comment may be made on Dr. Nida’s article, though it does not affect his argument. At the foot of page 102 he says “it was a practice in ancient times for one person to read a text aloud while several scribes were engaged in copying it down from dictation.” The extent to which books were produced in the ancient world by copying from dictation has been much debated among scholars. Certainly this method was sometimes resorted to by publishers with large orders to fulfil, and it is probably that the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus was written from dictation. (See T. C. Skeat, “The use of dictation in ancient book-production”, in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1956, 179-208). But it is unlikely that any of the New Testament books were copied in this way in the first and second centuries when most of the errors got into the manuscripts. In those days there was no organization of scripture production for sale or wise distribution; books would have been copied by literate individuals. However, the hypothesis of writing from dictation is not necessary to account for scribal confusion of words identical in sound. Anyone copying by eye is liable to do this through hearing the word mentally as he writes. Those of us who write our own letters know how easy it is to write “their” for “there” or even “no” for “know”.