

EPISTEMOLOGY

Wilbur N. Pickering, ThM PhD

Kind reader, permit me to suggest that the matter of epistemology has not received the attention it deserves within the discipline of NT textual criticism. Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge, including origin and foundations. Where does knowledge come from? “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). Is that correct? It can only be correct if the Sovereign Creator exists—to fear a nonexistent being will not result in true knowledge. Any evolutionist will naturally exclude the supernatural from any model that he creates, as did Fenton John Anthony Hort. Note that such a model does not allow for the possibility of a divinely inspired NT. The evolutionary hypothesis, as a theory of origins, is scientifically impossible; the evidence that surrounds us clearly points to the existence of an incredibly intelligent and powerful Creator.

If the Creator exists, and if He has delivered a written Revelation to our race, nothing should be more important to us than to know what He said. Of course, because He will be the Source of all true knowledge. Stop and think. If some Being created our planet with all it contains, including all forms of life (plants have life), and especially including our ability to reason,¹ He is obviously competent to give us correct information about what He created. He is the Source of objective truth about our planet. How do we ‘know’ anything? Only if we have experienced it, or if someone else has experienced it and tells us about it. But what happens if experiences conflict? And how can we know if or when we interpret an experience correctly? And how can we handle conflicting interpretations?

If there is no Creator to give us correct information, our ‘knowledge’ is condemned to be always partial and uncertain, when not dangerously mistaken. This is equally true for those who pretend that there is no Creator. The despair of relativism and unrelenting uncertainty about everything that is not hard science is the result. King Solomon was smart enough to figure that out 3,000 years ago: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Satan has been filling the world with sophistries for 6,000 years, so there is no end of fake ‘knowledge’ out there—not least in the ‘science’ of NT textual criticism. For someone who claims to be a Christian to exclude the supernatural from his working model is to involve himself in a fundamental epistemological contradiction. He claims to be a Christian, but he works like an atheist. Anyone who excludes the supernatural from his thinking obviously does not have the Holy Spirit, and is therefore wide-open to satanic interference in his mind.²

It will not do for someone to claim that he is only trying to be neutral; neither God nor Satan will allow neutrality. The Sovereign Creator, while He walked this earth as Jesus, was quite clear on the subject. “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does

¹ Remember Descartes? “I think, therefore I am.”

² I have written extensively on the subject of biblical spiritual warfare. Most of it may be found in my book, *Essays on Discipleship, Missions and Spiritual Warfare*, 2nd edition, 2017. It is also available from my website, www.prunch.org (or www.prunch.com.br). For starters, you should meditate on Ephesians 2:2, along with Luke 8:12 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-4.

not gather with me scatters” (Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23). Please note that this includes both what we believe and what we do: scattering is an activity. To work like an atheist is to be against Jesus. To practice atheistic textual criticism is to be against Jesus. Neutrality does not exist.

In 1881, when Westcott and Hort published their two-volume work, John William Burgon immediately began demonstrating that their theory and work was contrary to the empirical evidence. Burgon’s biographer wrote this: “Burgon was in this country [England] the leading religious teacher of his time”.³ Burgon was a man of unquestioned scholarship; his biographer lists over fifty published works, on a considerable variety of subjects. His index of New Testament citations by early Christian leaders consists of sixteen thick manuscript volumes, to be found in the British Library; it contains 86,489 quotations.⁴ Burgon’s scholarship in this area of the total field has never been equaled. He may be the only person, living or dead, who personally collated each of the five great early uncials (known in his day)— α , A, B, C, D—in their entirety (NT). He catalogued 374 Greek MSS; in those days there were not even microfilms, he had to go personally to wherever a MS was held.

Because of Burgon’s firsthand acquaintance with the empirical evidence, his refutation of Hort’s theory has never been answered, at least based on the evidence. He was either ignored, or misrepresented: ‘all he does is count MSS’, a perverse (and grotesque) falsehood; ‘he just doesn’t understand genealogy’, equally perverse and equally false.⁵ But the most strident, and ongoing, criticism was that his argumentation was theological, because he believed in, and defended, the divine inspiration of the NT. It is here that epistemology comes in: the attacks against Burgon were really a malignant epistemology attacking a godly epistemology.

It is impossible to work without presuppositions, in any discipline. It is therefore perverse to criticize someone for having them. That said, presuppositions can, and should be evaluated. Once evaluated, a presupposition may reasonably be criticized. The concrete (empirical) evidence is presumably the same for everyone, but the interpretation that one gives to the evidence will be controlled (or at least heavily influenced) by his presuppositions. It follows that every honest scholar should openly state his presuppositions. To fail to do so is reprehensible.⁶ For someone who does not state his presuppositions to criticize someone else for doing so is worse than perverse—to pretend that he himself does not have any is depraved (well, maybe just brainwashed and blinded).

³ E.M. Goulburn, *Life of Dean Burgon* (London: John Murray, 1892, 2 vols.), I, vii.

⁴ Leo Vaganay, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, trans. B.V. Miller (London: Sands and Co., Ltd., 1937), p. 48.

⁵ Most ‘scholars’ and professors are really ‘parrots’, just repeating what they were taught—they have never gone back to the source to see if it is true. How many Greek NT ‘scholars’ have collated even one Greek manuscript? (Did Hort collate any MSS?) They blindly accept what has been written on the subject, perhaps not realizing that most of what has been written was done by ‘parrots’.

⁶ While I was a student in theological seminary we were taught that we should never question someone else’s motives. Now really, where do you suppose that ‘doctrine’ came from?

Although I am not in Burgon's class as a scholar (living in the Amazon jungle with an indigenous people did not permit scholarly research), I also have been constantly criticized for openly stating my belief that God both inspired and preserved the NT. It is even alleged that such a belief makes it impossible to do objective scholarly work. Well, well, well, if a servant of God cannot do objective scholarly work, then a servant of Satan most certainly cannot do so either. So on what basis does a servant of Satan criticize a servant of God? He does so on the basis of his presuppositions, his epistemology.

A brother who lives in Curitiba, the state capital of Paraná, recently wrote an introduction to a book in Portuguese that I am co-authoring. He praises my work from the point of view of epistemology. I found his argument to be so interesting (it inspired this article) that I translated it, sent the translation to him to be sure I got it right, and asked his permission to use it. His name is Carlos Eduardo Rangel Xavier. I ask you to concentrate on his argument, and not be distracted by the praise.

Dr. Pickering's work within NT textual criticism (although he himself does not consider himself a textual critic⁷), especially in the collating of manuscripts, is impressive and incomparable. But more than that, his theory about the preservation of the New Testament by means of the group of manuscripts that he identifies as Family 35 is endowed with an epistemological solidity, with a methodological rigor and with an apologetic value that are equally impressive.

From an epistemological and apologetic point of view, his work starts with the presuppositional premise that God delivered a written revelation to the human race, and that would not make sense if His divine providence were not going to preserve that written revelation. As with every epistemological first principle, this point needs to be presupposed, and Dr. Pickering has always insisted upon making his presuppositions very clear, thereby demonstrating intellectual honesty.

But it is in the analysis of the empirical evidence that the impressive methodological rigor of Dr. Pickering's theory resides.

Although I insist upon emphasizing that his theory has a presuppositional epistemological base, I will nevertheless introduce a consideration of the empirical evidences using a completely different axis. As a consequence of the recent impact that scholars like Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig have contributed to my studies, I will now use modal logic to work on the base of an evidential apologetic.

Therefore, after making clear that the lines that follow refer exclusively to a work of persuasive argumentation, using modal logic, that I am here elaborating (and not to the way in which Dr. Pickering constructs his arguments), I can enunciate the following premises as a basis for reasoning about the preservation of the New Testament Text exemplified by Family 35.

⁷ True. I consider myself a textual student; the Text is above me. A critic is above the text. I do not have a theory of textual criticism; my theory is about textual preservation.

- 1) It is possible that God delivered a written revelation to the human race.
- 2) If God delivered such a revelation to us, it is reasonable that it would be preserved.
- 3) The existence of a preserved text confirms 1) and 2).
- 4) The only type of text that objectively exemplifies 3) is that of Family 35.

To believe that God exists is a decision of faith. But it is not an irrational faith, since the Christian faith constitutes, as Alvin Plantinga has argued, a warranted belief, and that therefore corresponds to true knowledge, if the object of that belief is true. The traditional apologetic arguments for the existence of God function in this area.

On the other hand, the historical consideration of the person of Jesus is related to the question of revelation, since all the basic facts of the Christian faith lead to Christ as the culminating point in the process of self-revelation by God in History.

Therefore, if a God who created all things exists, and if He decided to reveal Himself to us in Christ, it is perfectly reasonable to infer that He also delivered and preserved a written revelation for us.

In other words, the only premise that is added to the basic facts of the Christian faith by inference is the preservation of the Text of the New Testament. That is to say, Dr. Pickering's Trinitarian theism presupposes not only the God who is Creator, Redeemer and Provider, but adds to God's Providence, by a simple rational inference, the preservation of the New Testament Text.

However all that may be, it is important to note that although I assigned the proof of 1) to traditional apologetics, and that in addition 2) may reasonably be inferred on the basis of 1), the fact remains that, for the purpose of analyzing the argument, proposition 3) follows from 1) and 2). Therefore, the whole validity of the argument depends only on proving 4); that is to say, that the text of Family 35 is the only text type of the New Testament that can be demonstrated objectively as having been preserved. It is here that Dr. Pickering's work comes into play.

It is precisely at this point, the demonstration of proposition 4), that Dr. Pickering's work ceases to be merely presuppositional and becomes empirical, analyzing the evidence in an objective way, something that any respectable contemporary scientist tries to do.

That is, the demonstration of the antiquity and the independence of the text of Family 35 is based on objective arguments and on a comparison of the evidences (all the extant manuscripts). In this area as well, Dr. Pickering's work is incomparable.

Taking advantage of the correlation with apologetics, I can state that Dr. Pickering's work with the evidences, just like Christian apologetics, uses a strategy of both defense and offence.

From the point of view of defense, his work consists in pointing out the inconsistency of the subjective postulates of the eclectic theory, and in demonstrating objectively the inferior quality of the earliest manuscripts.

From the point of view of offence, his work consists in looking at the possible lines of transmission of the text and in analyzing objectively the available evidences—that is, the manuscripts. The conclusion to which he has arrived is that Family 35 is the only archetype for the text of the whole New Testament that can be objectively demonstrated. [It is certainly the only one that has been demonstrated so far.]

Thank you, Professor Xavier! Anyone who deals fairly with my work⁸ knows that I do not use supernatural or theological arguments to defend the divine preservation of the NT text. My claim that Family 35 preserves the Original wording is based entirely on empirical evidence, and logical deduction based on that evidence. If I use divine providence at all, it is only to explain the facts, not to arrive at them. The only way to explain the internal character of Family 35 is to understand that God was preserving His Text.

I insist that I am not a pure empiricist. My work is anchored in a transcendental premise. My collation of MSS has provided the empirical attestation of the premise. I do not use the premise to arrive at the facts; I arrive at the facts empirically. I use the premise to explain the facts, once they have been empirically determined. **My epistemology is based on the person and work of Sovereign Jesus.**⁹

⁸ Since Satan obliges his servants to prevaricate, I do not expect to be treated fairly by them.

⁹ Hebrews 1:10, John 1:10 and Colossians 1:16 make clear that of the three Persons who make up the Godhead, Jehovah the Son was the primary agent in the creation of our planet and our race. So He is the Source of all true knowledge relative to life on this planet, as Colossians 2:3 plainly states: “in whom all the treasures of the wisdom and the knowledge are hidden”.