

Evaluating the 'basic principle'

Anyone who studies NT textual criticism will encounter the following statement: The basic principle of textual criticism is: choose the reading that best explains the rise of the others (or something similar). The uninitiated reader probably will not discern that the statement depends on certain presuppositions (that might be fallacious). Textual criticism only exists for texts whose original wording is deemed to be 'lost'. No one does textual criticism on today's newspaper, or last week's news magazine. No one even does textual criticism on the 1611 King James Version, since we still have printed copies thereof. Anyone familiar with the terrain knows that for the last 140 years, or so, the academic world has been dominated by the notion that the original wording of the NT text is in fact 'lost'. That notion is based squarely on Hort's theory. That theory denies: 1) that the NT writings were divinely inspired; 2) that the early Church recognized them to be Scripture; 3) that they received any special care or protection. As a result, by the time that the superstition and credulity of the Christians had elevated the NT writings to the status of 'Scripture', the original wording was irrevocably 'lost', in the sense that no one knew what it was. Therefore, so goes the theory, it is impossible to recover the original wording by using objective criteria; so they appeal to subjective criteria. (It should be obvious to any thinking person that this places the critic above the text. Notice, further, that there is no way of knowing if they have found it.)

The notion that the original wording of the NT text is 'lost' rejects (or at least ignores) the historical evidence that shows that the transmission of the NT writings was basically normal, from the beginning. That notion also rejects the vast majority (90-95%) of the extant NT manuscripts that represent the Byzantine tradition.¹ Having done that, what do the critics have left to work with? They are left with a handful of relatively early MSS that are so disparate that they cannot be grouped. They not only disagree with the majority, they disagree among themselves. They survived because they are so bad that no one wanted to use them. They have neither 'parents' nor 'children', which means that they were private productions and not honest copies; they are not part of a line of transmission.

So what do the critics do when those few MSS disagree among themselves? They ask: Which reading best explains the creation of the others? So what criteria do they use to arrive at that conclusion? They ask questions like these:

- 1) Which is the oldest MS?
- 2) Which is the 'best' MS?
- 3) Which is the shorter reading?
- 4) Which is the 'harder' reading?
- 5) Which reading best agrees with the author's style and purpose?

Question 1) is based on the analogy of a stream, whose water will be purest at the source; the greater the distance from the source, the more contaminants the water will have. However, with reference to NT MSS the analogy is certainly false. It is generally agreed that most of the damage suffered by the NT text had happened by the year 200, the date ascribed to our earliest MSS of any size (P⁶⁶). So our earliest MSS could be full of 'damage'.

¹ Having rejected the divine inspiration of the NT, they of course reject any divine solicitude for that text. Those who deny the very existence of a Sovereign Creator will logically insist that a nonexistent being cannot do anything.

Question 2): They generally declare Codex B (Vaticanus, 03) to be the 'best' extant MS. What is the basis for their claim? Hort, based on his subjective preferences (including the early date), declared B to be by far the 'best' MS, and subsequent critics have generally fallen in line with that dictum. But is there any objective basis for the claim? So far as I know, there is none; the objective evidence available says the contrary. (My evaluation applies to all other early MSS as well.)

Questions 3) and 4) are totally naturalistic, excluding any theological or supernatural considerations whatsoever. Hort imported them from the Alexandrian school's procedure for arriving at the original wording of Homer. Anyone who has collated any number of NT MSS, as I have done, knows that those criteria are false. With reference to the NT, the 'harder' reading criterion is obviously perverse.

Question 5) is totally subjective, subject to the critic's whim, bias, theoretical orientation, personal perversity, or whatever. This criterion is unacceptable on its face. Why should any servant of Satan be allowed to determine the wording of the Text, based on his personal preference?

Anyone who respects objective evidence should reject the five criteria discussed above. Anyone who respects objective evidence should understand that the transmission of the NT Text was basically normal, and that the mass of extant MSS must be accorded the respect that they deserve. All the extant MSS deserve to be collated, thereby allowing us to group them empirically. The empirically defined families must then be compared and evaluated. The canard, 'MSS should be weighed, not counted', is a cop-out.