

Lecture Twenty

Searching for the Critical Text

Scope: The discovery and collection of ancient manuscripts fueled the drive toward the construction of a truly critical edition of the Bible. This lecture describes the character of a critical edition, the materials available for the establishment of a critical edition of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, and stages toward the completion of the task. It discusses the way scholars trace the family history of manuscripts and make decisions concerning the earliest (hypothetical) state of the biblical text. In addition to the quest for the earliest possible text, this discipline also opens the way for another aspect of the history of biblical interpretation, with variant readings showing how specific faith communities of the past heard the Bible.

Outline

- I. The most important evidence for the development of a scholar's Bible was the desire for a *critical text* in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek.
 - A. The Protestant Reformation had placed its emphasis squarely on the literal meaning of Scripture, but where was that literal sense to be found? Early translations were based on few and faulty manuscripts.
 - B. Comparison among manuscripts indicated that copyists had altered their texts in a variety of ways, raising doubts concerning the reliability of translations.
 - C. The location, collection, and analysis of manuscripts sharpened the desire to find the earliest—perhaps even original—form of the biblical text.
 - D. The quest for a critical text is one of the most truly scientific aspects of biblical study, more elaborate and advanced in the case of the New Testament than in the case of the Hebrew Bible.
- II. To understand the accomplishment, it is necessary to understand the dimensions of the problem.

- A. The most obvious difficulty facing the establishment of the text is the sheer amount and complexity of data.
1. More than 5,000 Greek manuscripts are extant, many of them in fragmentary condition and all of them requiring deciphering.
 2. In addition to the Greek texts, there are thousands of manuscripts in all the ancient versions, with their own variations from one another; besides these, there are countless citations and allusions in patristic literature, some of which predate our earliest manuscript tradition.
 3. In each of these kinds of texts, scholars find the many kinds of unintentional and intentional alterations that are inevitable in scribal labor; no two manuscripts are exactly alike, and there are tens of thousands of “variants.”
- B. The process of solving the problem has required infinite patience and hard decisions.
1. Simply identifying, collecting, transcribing, and collating manuscripts is a monumental labor, itself subject—especially before computerization—to its own “scribal errors.”
 2. A necessary step is to identify *families* of manuscripts and trace their descent from the newest back to the oldest.
 3. It is clear that the vast majority of manuscripts from the medieval period belong to one basic family (Byzantine or Koine), but older manuscripts fall into more distinct groups (Alexandrian, Western, Caesarean).
 4. In attempting to establish a critical text, the basic choice is between adopting a single manuscript or family as a base and using a more radically eclectic method.
- C. Since the time of J. A. Bengel (1687–1752), scholars have used three rules of thumb in deciding between variant readings.
1. The weight, not the amount, of evidence should be counted: A few of the older and more reliable manuscripts tend to carry the decision over a multitude of newer and less reliable witnesses.
 2. The shorter reading is to be preferred: This rule is based on the observation that, in general, copyists tend to expand a text rather than shorten it.
 3. The harder reading is to be preferred: This sometimes counterintuitive rule is based on the premise that scribes try to

“improve” a text in the direction of what they think it “ought” to say—thus, the “easier” reading.

- III.** Progress toward a fully critical text demanded the dedication of countless scholars over a period of centuries.
- A.** Among the pioneers were Richard Simon (1638–1712), who challenged the Protestant conception of the adequacy of Scripture on the basis of text criticism; J. A. Bengel; and J. J. Wettstein (1693–1754), whose two-volume edition of the New Testament in 1751–1752 provided a rich set of variants, organized into categories.
 - B.** The scientific method proper began with a clean break from the Textus Receptus with J. J. Griesbach (1745–1812), and Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), who tried to establish the Greek text of the New Testament as it was in the 4th century.
 - C.** The 19th and early 20th centuries were dominated by the labors of von Tischendorff (1815–1874), who not only found and edited manuscripts but produced a number of fine critical editions; B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, who argued for four basic text groups and, in 1881, produced an influential critical edition based primarily on Vaticanus and Sinaiticus; J. Weiss, whose New Testament in Greek (three volumes) used the eclectic method; and H. F. von Soden, who in 1913, produced a monumental two-volume edition of the Greek text.
 - D.** The most widely used critical edition is based on the work of Eberhard Nestle (1851–1913), who devised a text based on the agreement of any two versions among the editions of Westcott and Hort, Weiss, and von Tischendorff, but who also supplied a wealth of textual variants. The Nestle-Aland is now in its 27th edition and forms the basis, as well, of the United Bible Societies’ edition for translators.
- IV.** What, then, is a critical edition, and how do scholars use it?
- A.** A *critical edition* contains a Greek (or Hebrew) text that, in the judgment of the editors, best approximates the earliest available form of what was written.
 - B.** The *critical apparatus* provides the manuscript evidence for and against the decisions made by the editors.

- C. Scholars and translators are able to use both the judgments reflected in the body of the text and the variants to make their own textual decisions.

Essential Reading:

L. Vaganay and C. B. Amphoux, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*.

Supplementary Reading:

K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does the critical text of the New Testament illustrate the fact that the Bible is a “constructed book”?
2. Compare the degree of difficulty in constructing the critical text of the New Testament to producing an edition of other ancient writings.