

The Epistemological Problems of Textual Criticism

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Introduction:

“Professing to be wise they become fools.” No other statement so succinctly sums up the intellectual quagmire into which those of the higher critical school have fallen. It pains the mind to try and give a fair reading to their theories about the multiple sources and various documents from which the text of the Scriptures was supposedly derived. Instead of reading the Scripture as it is presented to us they “find” a cache of documents which underlie the text. Instead of accepting the Hebrew Scriptures as the work of one inspired author they suppose it was the work of many dubious redactors. Instead of taking the simplest and most straight forward reading of the text they must construct an apparatus with the proportions and goal of Babel. To look for logical consistency in their theories one would have to be as creative as they.

Their theory about the fundamental unreliability of the Scriptures has implications for every area of thought. Linguistically, they must produce voluminous lexicographical tomes for the purpose of burying and obscuring the plain meaning of simple words. Stylistically, they attribute the narrative skill of a two year old to the prophets of Israel. Ethically, they impute men whom God has declared righteous and too good for this world¹ with the most heinous twisting and propagandizing of historical fact. Scientifically, they are guilty of selective data entry the likes of which Al Gore could learn from. Logically, they beg questions like a dog begging scraps. But the most fundamental error in their thinking occurred on the philosophical level. The most comprehensive refutation of higher criticism can only come from attacking and refuting the epistemological presuppositions of higher criticism. It is their presuppositions and the religious tenacity and blindness with which they hold them that has lead these

¹ Hebrews 11:38

scholars astray. This paper will focus on these presuppositions and their refutation as a defense of the hope that is in all the faithful who receive and submit to the Word of God as contained in the Old Testament.

Epistemological Presuppositions:

The question that is asked by the higher critical scholars is a question of knowledge. They ask whether or not we can know if the text of the Scriptures that we possess are the real authentic texts which were written by the prophets and if they are not how much of the body of material that we possess is authentic. This question has different forms when applied to the Old and New Testaments. The practice of textual criticism has been far bolder in denying the authenticity of the Old Testament Scriptures as they are possessed by the church in the modern day. This type of textual criticism has been referred to as literary criticism since these critics of the Scripture attempt to do so based upon mere literary grounds. The species of textual criticism which is aimed at the New Testament has been of a more subtle variety and is primarily concerned with obtaining the correct reading of a given New Testament passage. However the work of the New Testament critic is of the same genus as that of the Old Testament critic. We may account for the subtler approach of the New Testament critics by observing two key factors. One, after the advent of literary criticism in the mid to late 19th century the leading theories of this school went through many years of thorough critique from friend and foe alike. Seeing that it is not safe to stick your neck out too far the New Testament critics have used more subtlety in their approach. This subtlety is seen in their reticence to deny the internally given author of a book (for instance: Paul as the author of Ephesians) or to separate the New Testament text into as many parts as the Old

Testament scholar does. The second factor which has contributed to the subtleness of the New Testament critic is the abundance of witnesses which we have for the New Testament. No other text from the ancient era has as many documents from as near to the time of original composition as the New Testament has, the numbers reach into the thousands.² Because there are so many witnesses for the New Testament it is hard for any scholar to make assertions about the reading of the text based upon only a few witnesses. The amount of contrary witnesses to any such assertion provides ample evidence to reject that assertion. Thus, the New Testament critic is severely limited in his “freedom” to toy with the Scriptural data. From the preceding it is important to see that criticism of both Old and New Testaments are from the same genus, but perhaps not the same species in all instances. This genus is one of skepticism. The operating epistemic principle in most textual criticism is skepticism. We will relate this to the broader consideration later in the paper.

The work of textual criticism or “lower” criticism is an attempt to determine the correct reading of the text of the New Testament. The work of so called “higher” critics is to determine what the actual documents were which went into the final product of the Torah, prophets, etc. In both cases there is a quest for knowledge and in this quest for knowledge there are canons by which these scholars operate in their assessment of the text of Scripture. The question that needs to be asked in response to the findings of critical scholars is whether their canons of knowledge are valid or sufficient to answer the questions that they pose. Thus, we must consider the nature of knowledge and what takes place in the acquisition of knowledge. The justness of this approach can be seen in

² In his book, written in 1967, Bruce Metzger cites the existence of some 2,754 miniscule manuscripts. (pg 32, *The Text of the New Testament*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992)

the fact that many textual critics pride themselves on being “scientific” in their quest for knowledge about the authenticity of the biblical texts. The assumed value of science and the scientific method is that it is a reliable means for ascertaining truth, or true knowledge.

The acquisition of knowledge may be used as another term for learning, learning being the acquisition and synthesis of knowledge. All learning is authoritarian in nature, meaning that in order to learn one must submit to some authority and receive the knowledge that that authority gives. Thus, for one to learn from any source there must first, be a submission to that source as a legitimate authority. If there is no submission to the authority, then no knowledge will be gained. Submission to an authority means accepting the norms or canons that that authority uses to define truth. This is the reason that philosophical skepticism destroys all knowledge, for it places the skeptic in the place of authority and is unwilling to submit to any other authority besides the native ability to reason and question. The skeptical view implies that the individual human mind, equipped with the tools of reason and logic, can determine what is and is not true; or if not with pure reason than with the deliverances of its physical senses; or if not these two in isolation then some combination of the two. In all three of the preceding epistemological positions the learner remains the arbiter of truth.³ In other words the one who would attempt to learn is also the authority as to whether what he learns is true or not. The absurdity of this is plain to see; however, this is the epistemological position that the West has been left with since the Enlightenment. The exaltation of reason and the scientific method placed the learner in the position of determiner through the

³ Very similar to the promise that Satan made to our first parents that they shall be as gods determining good and evil for themselves.

skeptical questioning of the body of knowledge that the Middle Ages gave to the West. This body of knowledge that was given to the west was founded squarely on the Word of God. Though the understanding of God's Word became corrupted through papal extravagances and Scholastic logic, the epistemological foundation of the west was reestablished during the Reformation, which it is just to call the closing era of the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages had a better epistemology generally because it was very authoritarian in its outlook.⁴

This general picture of things is instantiated in the critical studies of the 19th and 20th centuries. I restrict the instances of textual criticism to these centuries because that is when these disciplines really began to take hold of society, though there are antecedents in the early days of the church.⁵ I also restrict Enlightenment skepticism to these areas of study because, while skepticism in one area often bleeds over into another, time and space prevent a sufficient synthesis of all the propositions that the Enlightenment gave us. After the Reformation, the question began to be asked if the text of the Scriptures that was in possession of the church was reliable. In the 19th century the question began to be asked if the geological, biological, and anthropological information found in the Old Testament was reliable in light of recent discoveries in those fields. The most significant side effect of questioning the Scriptures with canons of knowledge alien to them is that you separate yourself from the source of knowledge. God is the ultimate authority, thus he is the ultimate source for all knowledge. Since he is both of these he is the ultimate teacher and any who do not submit to him cannot have knowledge. The way that we

⁴ For a very interesting discussion of this the reader is directed to C. S. Lewis' work [The Discarded Image](#). Herein Lewis describes the Medieval society as very clerkish, wanting to accept all the statements of the past since longevity conferred authority to a proposition.

⁵ See chapter V of Bruce Metzger's "The Text of the New Testament" for summary of these.

submit to him is by heeding his word and taking it as the truth. Meaning that when it speaks it speaks truly because it is the Word of God.

Before we proceed to establish God as the ultimate presupposition of knowledge we need to trace the philosophical development of the Enlightenment which created the environment within which this presupposition could be questioned. Cartesian dualism or Rationalism and Deism are the two factors which dove-tailed in the late 18th and 19th centuries to create this environment. On the heels of the Reformation Rene Descartes began meditating on philosophy. His burden was to put knowledge on a sure foundation; his method was doubt. He posited that one must have absolute certainty in order to know anything. From this position the only sure article of knowledge he could maintain was his own existence. *Dubito ergo, sum* and *Cogito ergo, sum* were the two famous dictums which summed up his philosophy. "If I doubt, I am thinking, if I am thinking then I exist." From this sure foundation Descartes reasoned his way back to every article of knowledge that he had previously doubted; the external world, God's existence, morality, etc. Thus human knowledge was placed on the foundation of human reason. The second factor which allowed for the questioning of God's Scripture was the advent on deism. This system posits that the world was created by God with certain natural laws by which he purposed it to continue uninterrupted by his hand. The watchmaker analogy is quite apt to illustrate this philosophy. By asserting this type of universe, the deist denies a supernatural one.

Form the preceding paragraph we see how the West was separated from God the ultimate authority for knowledge. This was done is two ways, epistemologically and metaphysically. Epistemologically the knowledge base of the West was taken away from

the Christian view that was propounded by Paul, Augustine, and Calvin; namely that we believe to understand. While the Cartesian method may not have obtained everywhere, nevertheless it serves as an example of the efforts of the West to establish her knowledge on some other foundation than Jesus Christ, if I may use a metonym. As we have already observed, when one separates from God as the ultimate authority for knowledge, knowledge itself is destroyed. Metaphysically, deism removed the certainty which a divine revelation confers to the faith and mind of those who submit to that revelation. If the universe is merely a giant watch, and if all the Creator does is watch, then at no point in time could he have stopped his watch. In other words, a supernatural revelation from the Creator God is an impossibility in a deistic universe. All phenomena in that universe must be accounted for according to laws innate to that universe, including the miracle of Scripture. Thus the environment was created for textual criticism to flourish.

The children of the Enlightenment began questioning the reliability of the Scriptures based upon the belief in natural law. Natural law, it is believed, is a sufficient source of knowledge. Man, with the aid of reason, can deduce from the deliverances of natural law all that he needs to know about the creation, human society, and even the value of religion. It was supposed, on natural law principles, that men could give an account for the Scriptures. Or if, according to the principles of natural law, no account could be satisfactorily given then the Scriptures were not reliable. However, in adopting this approach, man had separated himself from the source of knowledge, God, and was attempting to give an account for the authority of his Word using authorities foreign to that Word. That there are laws at work in nature is true and that these laws teach men about their creator is also true, but the question hinges on whether man is able to learn

from these laws without “Scripture spectacles”. In the garden, Adam rebelled against his creator. He therefore refused to submit to God as the ultimate authority and thus lost the ability to learn from God through the creation, since one must submit to the authority in order to learn from it. The created order was made by God thus he is the authority to whom men must submit in order to learn from creation and creation’s God. Thus because of the fall, man is no longer able to learn from the creation what he ought to have been able to learn when he was in a state of innocence. The only remedy for this state of affairs is regeneration by the Holy Spirit using the Word of God to subdue our hearts to the great teacher, God. Therefore any canons of knowledge that are posited by critics of the Scriptures that are foreign to the Scriptures will not yield knowledge about the Scriptures. By way of illustration we may note the way a rebellious child compares with an obedient child. The rebellious child if not brought to submission to his parents will end up in a state of ignorant pride, a waste of his youthful potential. The obedient child will learn from his parents and gain understanding for the rest of his life. The children of the Enlightenment have rebelled against God and become fools.

Text Critical Skepticism:

As was noted earlier the textual critic adopts as his epistemological paradigm skepticism as to the reliability about the Biblical text. One can answer the skeptic in two ways; we can accept the burden of proof and attempt to refute the skeptic or we can place the burden of proof on him and rebut him by showing that his skepticism is unfounded. In the rest of the paper we will adopt the latter approach as it is most consistent with the presuppositional epistemology we have laid out previously.

The general method of the textual critic's skepticism seems to follow these general lines (I will try to state the case as generally and fairly as possible in order to rebut both the Old Testament critic and the New). First, there is the argument from error which states that since error can and has occurred in a given field of knowledge, whether in belief or practice, then we cannot know if a specific article of knowledge from that field is true or reliable. For instance, since scribes have been known to miscopy a text or intentionally change a text then it is possible that this happened to the Biblical text. Since it is logically possible that this happened to any part of the Biblical text then we must question the entire Biblical text. This is an instance of error of practice; the error occurred in the practice of copying. An instance of error in belief would be that since the medieval church doubted and condemned Galileo for his discoveries about the solar system, and it has been shown that his calculations were correct, and since science has discovered evidence for a much older earth than what the Bible presents in Genesis, the Genesis record must be wrong. Thus, we have the argument from error. Implied in this argument is that one must have absolute certainty in order to have knowledge, or at least to be justified in their knowledge. With these premises in hand the critic will either try to solve them in a naturalistic way, or use this possibility of error as reason to undermine faith in an inspired infallible text.

In the text of the New Testament the critic will focus on variants among different readings, according to the Westcott and Hort theory the genealogy of a text is more important than the numerical witnesses for a certain reading. In other words if a text from the "Neutral" family has a reading that is contradicted by a great majority of texts from a different family the reading of the neutral is to be preferred, because it has a better

pedigree. The introduction of textual families as a criterion for evaluating the worth of a reading is an example of bringing in a canon of knowledge that is foreign to the Scripture. It is also contradictory to the scientific method, as it is called. If a critic were to operate on purely scientific grounds then he would have to go with the reading that has statistically greater witnesses, not genealogically greater. The genealogical theory assumes a common archetype from which all of the families are derived; it also assumes that this archetype is lost. The assumption that the archetype is lost is one that needs to be justified before we can accept the theory of Westcott and Hort which is an attempt to recreate this archetype. If God's promise to preserve his Word is true then what reason do we have to doubt that the original text of Scripture has been lost? Or if the actual autograph is lost, why should we doubt that the accurate transmission of the text was not accomplished and that we have an accurate reliable text now? The only way for Westcott and Hort to justify their assumption that the archetype is lost is to deny the providential care of God for his people and his Word. The way that they do this is to say that the text of the New Testament was treated like any other ancient text until the third or fourth century when it was recognized as Scripture. However, another presupposition comes into play at this point. Did the apostolic church recognize the writings of the apostles as Scripture when they were written or only after some two or three centuries? If we look at the witness of Scripture itself, we see that from the beginning the writings of the apostles were recognized as Scripture. Examples of this can be seen in Peter's second epistle and in Paul's first epistle to Timothy. Both writers acknowledge another New Testament author or passage as Scripture. Peter says very plainly that Paul's writings are Scripture, and Paul quotes Luke along side a passage from Deuteronomy, calling both Scripture.

Now the question is placed back on Westcott and Hort, did the early church treat the New Testament like any other book or as the Word of Life? The presuppositions of your theory will determine the answer.

The preceding discussion of the Westcott and Hort theory shows that the issue at hand is one of presuppositions, evidence. One cannot try to fight the textual critics while accepting their presuppositions, this will lead to a foolish attempt at trying to save the text of Scripture while denying the presuppositions it contains. Once you do that what is the point in defending it? An example of this mistake can be seen the writing of William E. Gladstone. The honorable W. E. Gladstone, MP, was, in his free time, an antiquarian specializing in the history and documents of the Greeks. In his book The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture, Mr. Gladstone is attempting to save the honor of the Bible from the disparagement cast upon it by the discoveries of science in his day; this book was published in 1896. In his attempt to reconcile the record of Genesis with the discoveries of geology, he adopts a theory of truth which he thinks will save the “Mosaic author” from ruin. He accepts the doubt about the Mosaic authorship of the Torah and does not seem to question it. The theory of truth which he adopts is pragmatism. Gladstone’s words, “Given the facts as the geologist is lead [sic] to state them, given the Hebrew tongue as the instrument through which the relator [sic] has to work, what are the terms, and what is the order and adjustment of terms, through which he can convey the most of truth and force, with the lest incumbrance [sic] and of impediment, to the mind of man, in the condition in which he had to deal with it?”⁶ When Mr. Gladstone speaks of the condition of man as the author of Genesis had to deal with him he is assuming a childlike level of intelligence in the audience to which Genesis was written. This assumption also

⁶ William E. Gladstone, *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, Henry Altemus, Philadelphia 1896, pg 67

assumes an evolutionary method of creation; that Mr. Gladstone accepts this theory for the creation is seen in his discussion of the days of Creation. He does not view them as literal twenty four hour days.⁷ Also contained in the statement of Mr. Gladstone is the idea of practical efficiency as the determiner of the Mosaic author's word choice. To save the Biblical record from shame in the eyes of the geologists Mr. Gladstone says that the author of Genesis chose his words, not to convey objective truth about the creation, but in order to convey the idea most vividly to the minds of his audience. Thus, it does not really matter if you view the days of creation as literal twenty-four hour days or as historical epochs, all that matters is that you understand that God created the world in an orderly manner. Thus by adopting the presuppositions of contemporary science in order to try and save the Biblical record we deny the presuppositions of the Bible in the attempt.

Conclusion:

In conclusion we can see from the preceding discussion that in order to rebut the textual critic one must maintain the presuppositions of the Bible. The skeptic is the one with the burden of proof and all canons of knowledge that are foreign to Scripture are rebellious to the Lord. The text of Scripture is reliable and there is no real reason to doubt this fact unless you are in rebellion against the Living God.

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⁷ *The Impregnable Rock*, pg 63, 64

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