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BIBLICAL CRITICISM: LOWER AND HIGHER*

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BIBLICAL criticism today is not the most robust of academic disciplines. This is a qualitative statement — the quantity of young men pursuing graduate studies in universities is larger than ever. If Biblical criticism is relatively sterile today, the sterility is partly due to the separation of lower criticism from higher criticism, particularly in the practices of university schools of religion. Between lower and higher criticism there is a great gulf fixed. Both lower criticism and higher criticism are impoverished by this separation, and the younger scholars of this generation working in either field constantly expose their limitations. Significant interpretation of an ancient book is impossible without linguistic and technical competence. This is recognized by us lower critics although we feel that it is not always recognized by the higher critics.

Our great-grandfathers were well-educated in both these areas, in technical skills and in theory. They mastered languages, historical method, detailed interpretation of a text before they entered seminary or university. Today instruction in all these matters usually begins with the student's arrival in graduate school. The wealth of material available in any one field, both in original sources and in the "scholarly literature," creates an insatiable demand for the student's time. The consequent pressure for students' time in the curriculum forces them to choose between lower and higher criticism.

* The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 29, 1947, at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

This choice is being made with increasing frequency in favor of lower criticism. Biblical criticism has begun to suffer from the popularity of lower criticism with candidates for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This popularity rests on three characteristics of lower criticism. First, it is theologically innocuous (a matter of no little concern to the young graduate in search of a job who must carry his thesis with him to the new position). Second, it is more "objective" than higher criticism and thus is more "scientific," more "scholarly," more academically respectable. In the third place, it is capable of infinite fragmentation. It can be broken down into "manageable proportions" for the Ph.D. dissertation. Each of these qualities has reinforced the popularity of lower criticism in graduate schools, until it has dominated the education of the future teachers and scholars. This is seen in such dissertation subjects as "A Study of Three Manuscripts of the Gospels," "The Adversative Use of *καί* in the Greek Bible," and even "The Greek of the Fourth Gospel: A Study of its Aramaisms in the Light of Hellenistic Greek." Many titles sound like higher criticism but are nevertheless limited by method of treatment to the realm of lower criticism. It is only in the last fifty years that a "study of divine grace" in the scriptures could be carried through without reference to philosophy or theology. The advantages of specialization in lower criticism mentioned above are driving us toward abandonment of rational criticism; yet, paradoxically enough, the trend in lower criticism at this moment requires for expertness in this field a command of the skills and knowledges of higher criticism.

This can be illustrated from textual criticism — a study of the manuscript tradition of the New Testament. A hundred and twenty-five years ago the emphasis in this field was on "the most ancient sources" — Lachmann's edition was the first and classic expression of this emphasis. Tischendorf's work with its concentration on early (uncial) manuscripts is a further illustration. Seventy-five years ago the emphasis turned to objectivity and externality in method. Hort's championing of the genealogical method is the classic illustration of this. The

followers of Hort, in their espousal of objectivity, deserve Housman's indictment: they "... use manuscripts as drunkards use lamp-posts,— not to light them on their way but to dissimulate their instability."¹ Both these methods— emphasis on early manuscripts and emphasis on objectivity— show the influence of the prevailing scholarly and philosophical temper of the times on the textual criticism of the New Testament.²

Once the debate over Hort versus the Textus Receptus was over, British and American studies in this field were dominated by the pursuit of lore, the increasing of factual information, the publication of manuscripts or of their collation.³ Souter in 1909 discussed more than twenty newly available items.⁴ In 1932 Kenyon was able to discuss two score important sources unknown in Souter's work.⁵ Other nations aided in this development, and some scholars in England and America wrote in the field of theory. Yet in these countries, textual criticism was dominated by the objective task of editing manuscripts or col-

¹ A. E. Housman (ed.), *M. Manilii Astronomicon; Liber Primus*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: University Press, 1937). p. liii.

² Lachmann's repudiation of the Byzantine text in 1831 was preceded by similar actions by other scholars in regard to the classics. "The modern progress in the textual criticism of Greek classical texts dates from the beginning of the XIXth century, when August Boeckh initiated in his Pindar edition (1811-1819) the distinction between the 'old' text tradition and the Byzantine one." (Aleksander Turym, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Tragedies of Aeschylus*. [New York: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1943.]) Again, Hort's championing of genealogy is supported by the cult of objectivity in the second half of the nineteenth century.

³ I would not exempt the debate between champions of the Western Text and champions of the Neutral Text from this characterization. That debate was largely a debate on external evidence: which text had the more ancient patristic support? Which text had the wider geographic distribution? These were taken to be the central questions. It has not always been recognized that they are central only within Hort's theory. The basic question of just what is meant by the term "text" was occasionally raised but it was not discussed deeply or widely. The discussion of this term by von Soden and Streeter was superficial and most unsatisfactory in regard to the early period.

⁴ A. Souter, "Progress in the Textual Criticism of the Gospels since Westcott and Hort," in *Mansfield College Essays* (London, 1909), pp. 349-64.

⁵ Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Recent Developments in the Textual Criticism of the Greek Bible* (The Schweich Lectures, 1932). London: Milford, 1933.

lations.⁶ The Greek Gospel Texts series published by Goodspeed and the numerous publications by Kenyon are typical. It is not too much to say that a reputation for scholarship in this field can be achieved without serious discussion of history or theory, or any attack on the original text of any part of scripture, or indeed any reconstruction of a major portion of the history of the text.

Today textual criticism turns for its final validation to the appraisal of individual readings, in a way that involves subjective judgment. The trend has been to emphasize fewer and fewer canons of criticism. Many moderns emphasize only two. These are: 1) that reading is to be preferred which best suits the context, and 2) that reading is to be preferred which best explains the origin of all others.⁷

⁶ "The thirty years which have elapsed since the publication of their [W-H] edition have been characterized rather by an increase in the number of available documents and a more accurate knowledge of those then available than by any real advance in our knowledge of the history of the text." — Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1913), p. 126.

⁷ These two rules have been variously stated. Cf., for example, E. C. Colwell, *The Study of the Bible*, (Chicago, 1937), "All the variations in one passage are assembled; the student then chooses that one which best explains all the others . . . the further rule is employed that that variant is to be chosen which best fits the context — which is most at home in the author's style, vocabulary, ideas, and purposes." (p. 61 f.); Leo Vaganay, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, trans. by B. V. Miller (St. Louis, 1937), "(1) On examining the text the critic will choose the variant that offers the best explanation of the origin of all the others and cannot itself be explained by the others . . . (2) On examining the context the critic will choose that reading that best accords with the writer's special tendencies; he will take account of what is commonly called his practice, that is, his vocabulary, language, style, his way of quoting and method of composition, etc." (p. 87 f.); F. C. Grant, "The Greek Text of the New Testament" in *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* by the members of the Revision Committee (International Council of Religious Education, 1946), "Each reading must be examined on its merits, and preference must be given to those readings which are demonstrably in the style of the author under consideration." "Readings which explain other variants, but are not contrariwise themselves to be explained by the others, merit our preference; but this is a very subtle process, involving intangible elements, and liable to subjective judgment on the part of the critic." (p. 41).

These two rules are nothing less than concentrated formulas of all that the textual critic must know and bring to bear upon the solution of his problem. The first rule about choosing what suits the context exhorts the student to know the document he is working on so thoroughly that its idioms are his idioms, its ideas as well known as a familiar room. The second rule about choosing what could have caused the readings requires that the student know everything in Christian history which could lead to the creation of a variant reading. This involves knowledge of institutions, doctrines, and events. This is knowledge of complicated and often conflicting forces and movements. Christianity from the beginning was a vital and creative movement. It outran the formation of patterns and fences. It experienced the love of God first and formulated it afterwards. No single line can chart its course; no one orthodoxy can encompass it.

In this complexity, the student is guided not by rules, but by knowledge and judgment. He is guided by his knowledge of scribes and manuscripts, of Christian history and institutions and theology, and of the books whose textual form he is striving to perfect. He is guided also by his own judgment, a quality through which the application of reason to knowledge becomes an art.

Scholars of distinction have demonstrated again and again the inevitable and important role of judgment — a subjective quality — in the appraisal of a New Testament's authenticity. On the subject of judgment as opposed to an automatic objectivity, Housman has said, ". . . textual criticism is not a branch of mathematics, nor indeed an exact science at all. . . . It is therefore not susceptible of hard and fast rules. It would be much easier if it were; and that is why people try to pretend that it is, or at least behave as if they thought so. Of course you can have hard-and-fast rules if you like, but then you will have false rules, and they will lead you wrong; because their simplicity will render them inapplicable to problems which are not simple, but complicated by the play of personality. A textual critic engaged upon his business is not at all like Newton investigating the motions of the planets; he is much more like a dog hunting for fleas. If a dog hunted for fleas on mathemati-

cal principles, basing his researches on statistics of area and population, he would never catch a flea except by accident. They require to be treated as individuals; and every problem which presents itself to the textual critic must be regarded as possibly unique.

"Textual criticism is therefore neither mystery nor mathematics: it cannot be learnt either like the catechism or like the multiplication table. This science and this art require more in the learner than simply a receptive mind . . . If a dog is to hunt for fleas successfully, he must be quick and he must be sensitive. It does no good for a rhinoceros to hunt for fleas: he does not know where they are, and could not catch them if he did."⁸

In other words, the textual critic today in his ultimate decisions must operate as historian and theologian. True, textual criticism still pays lip service to genealogy but it has not used this method; it still talks about the great texts, but no great text has been reconstructed. I have argued elsewhere that genealogy is a broken reed. The greatest textual scholars of the past fifty years, e. g., K. Lake, F. C. Burkitt, and M. J. LaGrange, admit either explicitly or implicitly the impossibility of moving back through the great texts to the original text.⁹ The history of the transmission of the New Testament shows this clearly.

The autographs of the New Testament perished; they perished early. There is nothing mysterious or puzzling about this. They were written on papyrus. They were written to be read. They were read till the pages fell out or were torn. The early Christians were all evangelists, and the rapid multiplication of their

⁸ A. E. Housman, *Application of Thought to Textual Criticism*, published in the *Proceedings of the Classical Association, August 1921*. Vol. 18, London: 1922.

⁹ "The known representatives of a 'text' show such similarities that they may once have had a common archetype, but each of them has been so considerably modified by successive copying, or even revision, that this archetype can be only approximately reconstructed, with due allowance for alternative possibilities in almost every reading." Silva Lake, *Family II and the Codex Alexandrinus, Studies and Documents*, vol. V, ed. by Kirsopp Lake and Silva Lake. London, Christophers, 1936.

number created a demand for copies of these books. Thus, the originals of the New Testament books were copied before they perished, and in the first one hundred and fifty years of Christian history copies of copies multiplied.

These copies were made without effective control and without adequate check for accuracy. With the multiplication of the copies went a multiplication of variations, some intended, some unintentional. The first two Christian centuries witnessed the creation of the large majority of all variations known to scholars today.¹⁹ There was no one form of the New Testament that could be called the "Second Century New Testament."

The complexity of the situation was increased by cross-breeding. A New Testament of one type might be corrected by one of a very different sort. This led to the creation of some new readings when the scribes blended the readings of the two manuscripts. It led also to a new pattern of variations as the scribe's partial correction produced a New Testament which agreed with one manuscript in one verse and with another in the next. This mixture was universal; it has affected all our existing manuscripts.

By the fourth century, however, certain large groupings of manuscripts are easily distinguishable. They are usually called text-types. They are not the result of chance, but of intensive effort by individual Christians to reduce chaos to order and achieve some unity. They show by their nature that a strong hand shaped their beginnings. Editors did more extensive and more consistent work on the text than did the ordinary scribes. This work contributed some of the readings which we find in our various New Testaments.

There probably were at least four recognizable text-types in existence by the end of the third century. Each of them came into existence under definite limitations — limitations in the

¹⁹ "... during the first and most of the second century, the gospels would be, for the most part, copied by amateurs — for Christians were a poor community and a secret society under the ban of the police. It was during this period that all the really important various readings arose. Both insertion and omission would be more possible then than at a later date." B. F. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, (London, 1924), p. 36.

extent of the geographical area in which the text-type dominated, and limitation in the degree of uniformity achieved in making copies of the text-type. The text-types originated in particular cities and won their way slowly through one or more provinces. A text-type that was at home in the Roman province of Africa differed from the one commonly used in Italy though both were written in Latin.

The text-type was supported by controls that were only moderately effective. It was, therefore, subject to modification and change. If a text-type be regarded as the publication of a modern book, then we must allow for a large number of revised editions. Sometimes these followed the general lines of the original form of the text-type, but more often they involved change under the influence of some other text-type. Thus the manuscripts of any one text-type differ quite extensively from each other, and sometimes form sub-types. So generally is this true that it is more accurate to regard a text-type as a process rather than as a single event.

The text-type came into existence as the result of several historical developments, which matured in the fourth century A. D. These developments were, in the order of importance: 1) the triumph of Christianity over its rivals; 2) linguistic isolation; 3) the growth of learning within the church; and 4) the strengthening of ecclesiastical authority.

The paramount importance of the recognition of the Christian religion by the state lies in the fact that this brought the New Testament to the attention of the publishing industry. It was the entrance of the New Testament into the commercial book trade which did more than anything else to standardize its wording and improve the accuracy with which copies were produced. The publishers tried to get accurate or official copies from which to work; they transferred the New Testament from papyrus to parchment; they equipped it with the book paraphernalia of introductions, text divisions, indexes, etc. which the Greeks and Latins had developed in the publication of their classics. Above all they applied to the copying of the New Testament certain mechanisms which insured at least a modicum of accuracy in scribal work.

It could be assumed that each text-type as it developed from the second through the fourth century became the standard New Testament of a particular region, a local text-type, or a regional text-type.¹¹ But this requires the isolation of the entire region throughout the period. It must be isolated to begin with so that only one form of the New Testament enters the region; it must continue to be isolated to keep out alien New Testaments which might contaminate the original text of the region. But the Christians in these centuries were the original tourists. They went everywhere and they took their own testaments with them. It would have taken a large and effective customs force to have maintained a local text-type in a position of dominance.

No single New Testament was the source of all the New Testaments used by the Christians of any one area in the first four centuries. We know a lot about New Testaments in Egypt in this period, for Egypt's climate preserved the papyrus copies which elsewhere rotted away. The New Testaments which have been found in Egypt belong to all the known text-types.¹² Even after the fourth century when one text-type outnumbers all the others, the others are still there.

Even in the backwoods more than one New Testament was known. In the backwoods of Syria, for example, the Christians' isolation was increased by their ignorance of the Greek language and by their use of Syriac. Yet even here, where most of the evidence has perished, we know of two text-types and two forms of one of them.

Standardization of the text of the New Testament began

¹¹ B. H. Streeter, in *The Four Gospels* (London, 1924) says, ". . . as soon as there were numerous copies of a book in circulation in the same area, one copy would constantly be corrected by another, and thus within that area a general standard of text would be preserved. But what we have to consider is that it is unlikely that the errors in the first copy of the Gospel of John, for example, which reached Rome would be the same as those in the first copy which came to Alexandria; and as each of these would become the parent of most other copies used in those respective cities, there would, from the very beginning, be some difference between the local texts of Rome and Alexandria." (p. 35).

¹² Cf. P. L. Hedley, "The Egyptian Texts of the Gospels and Acts," *Church Quarterly Review*, CXVIII (1934), 23-39, 188-230.

about the end of the fourth century, progressed unevenly through the middle ages and found its period of greatest success from the invention of printing in the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. The earliest datable standard version was the revision of the earlier Latin versions made by Jerome at the request of Pope Damasus about A. D. 380. Early in the fifth century A. D., an energetic leader of the Syriac-speaking church, Rabbula, prepared a new form of the Syriac New Testament, the Peshitta, which won a rapid victory and effectively maintained its dominance. By the fifth century, the text-type variously called the Alexandrian or the Beta or the Neutral held a dominant position in Egypt. Long before the seventh century, the leadership of the Greek world passed to Constantinople, and there emerged there a form of the New Testament that was distinct from that of Alexandria and from that known in the West before Jerome. Today we know but little of its origin, and very little more of the steps by which it developed into the form in which we find it in the tenth century ruling all Greek Christendom. From the tenth to the fourteenth century, at least four distinguishable revisions of this Greek vulgate were produced. And a fifth — to which most medieval manuscripts belong — is not included because it is so amorphous that it hardly deserves the label “distinguishable.” This dominant medieval type is the Byzantine New Testament. One of its distinguishable cousins appears in the first printings of the New Testament, notably in those of Erasmus, the Elzevirs, and Stephanus.

The original New Testament may be likened to a collection of dresses. These dresses were worn out, cut up, and put into a scrap bag. This process was completed in the second century. Then frugal and industrious Christians came along, reached into the bag for material and made patchwork quilts out of it. When they lacked a needed piece they found it elsewhere; when a piece was misshapen, they trimmed it to fit. Some of these quilt makers liked long narrow quilts; some liked square ones; some had an antipathy to green color and would not use any material which contained it; others doted on red scraps. But most of the material came out of the scrap bag.

In the fourth and later centuries, some of the earlier quilts

were ripped up and put back in the bag, from which again new quilts were made — pieced out where necessary with new material. Many of these patterns became popular and were copied widely, but until the industrial revolution never with complete accuracy.

How would you reconstruct the original dresses? Would you reconstruct the quilts made since the fourth century? Would you try to remake the third century quilts? If you got back to the second century what formula would you use for getting the original dresses out of the scrap bag?

This hurried sketch shows that no objective method can take us back through successive reconstructions to the original. It indicates also that the problems of textual criticism cannot be solved by using only those resources that are peculiar to that discipline itself. The reconstruction of the original text must be made against the large tapestry of early Christian history with an understanding of the rich colors of early Christian theology. This is implicit in the two rules of criticism which I have cited before.

Thus Biblical criticism today in all its areas must have this double quality of higher and lower criticism united in a single branch. If it is to be vital and sound, it must somehow find the pattern of education that will make the Biblical critic of the next generation a whole man, higher and lower.

How do we obtain this education which was easily available to our grandfathers? The education of a Biblical scholar requires that college education, seminary education, and university education become related parts of an integrated program. If the freshman in a seminary had a general education before he came, so that the college curriculum need not be repeated; if the matriculant in graduate school could build upon his seminary education; we would not need an additional five years to produce an educated scholar. The clear definition of the educational task of each of these units and their relationship to each other is a prerequisite for the education of Biblical scholars.¹³

¹³ It is realistic to admit that in the chaos of contemporary education, opportunities for post-Ph.D. education are essential to the development of a Biblical scholar.

This educational reformation will not easily be achieved. We need realism rather than a facile optimism. To quote Housman again, "It is supposed that there has been progress in the science of textual criticism, and the most frivolous pretender has learnt to talk superciliously about 'the old unscientific days.' The old unscientific days are everlasting; they are here and now; they are renewed perennially by the ear which takes formulas in, and the tongue which gives them out again, and the mind which meanwhile is empty of reflexion and stuffed with self-complacency . . . Such a man as Hort, living in our time, would be a better critic than Hort was; but we shall not be better critics than Hort simply by living in our own time."¹⁴

The educational reformation that we need to produce Biblical critics for tomorrow can be achieved, but it needs a motivation deeper than the individual scholar's conventional dedication to the "advancement of knowledge." The intellectual curiosity of independent scholars is not an adequate support for the task of Biblical criticism. The academic freedom which is essential to good work in this field does not include the freedom to believe or teach that the subject matter is unimportant. Grown men are not free to play with marbles while the ground is shaking under their feet. If Biblical criticism is to be carried on, on the large scale which is necessary if it is to be carried on significantly, it requires a value judgment in someone's mind as to the importance of this literature for contemporary life. I personally am one of those who believe that it has this importance. Christianity like Judaism is rooted in history. No matter how our various orthodoxies interpret the events that make up our Biblical revelation, accurate knowledge of those events and their rational criticism remain important. For me as a Christian, the supreme value is found in the fact of Jesus and therefore not even New Testament textual criticism can be insignificant.

¹⁴ A. E. Housman, *ibid.*, p. 84. I have substituted Hort for Housman's reference to Scaliger.