

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute
OR
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

VOL. LXXXIX

1957



LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY
THE INSTITUTE, 22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

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945TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

OF THE

VICTORIA INSTITUTE

AT

THE CAXTON HALL

WESTMINSTER, S.W. 1

ON

MONDAY, 15th APRIL, 1957

PROFESSOR F. F. BRUCE, M.A.,

University of Sheffield,
in the Chair

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS RELIABILITY

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SYNOPSIS

The use of the Bible, both as a norm for Christian belief and practice and as a cardinal witness in the Christian appeal to history, requires the substantial integrity of the New Testament text. The New Testament was copied, before the age of printing, by hand for centuries in which errors and changes were bound to occur. Can we, despite these errors, recover the original form of the text? We have very early manuscripts for much of the New Testament and they vary among themselves, showing that their archetype must be older still. We can trace the text of the separate Gospels to a time before the formation of the Four Gospel Canon and perhaps that of the Pauline Epistles to a time before the formation of the Epistle Canon. The text preserves the distinctive styles of the various writers and conforms to the conditions and language of the first century A.D. No conjecture for any New Testament passage has established itself as certain. By comparison the Septuagint, well preserved on the whole, has suffered change which sometimes can be remedied only by conjecture. In choosing between variants in manuscripts there is still much to do, but, allowing for this task, we may conclude that the New Testament has come down to us substantially sound.

EVERY so often we see a report on gambling, on marriage and divorce, on nullity or some such subject. Usually these reports include a section in which the evidence of the Bible is explored and the text and meaning of the Bible passages in question examined. This procedure assumes that the teaching of the Bible is normative for life and practice. The Bible, however, is more than a norm for conduct. For our purposes we may assume that its significance lies, in addition, in its claim to be a vehicle of divine revelation and the archives of a religion whose appeal is to history. For each of these functions it is important that the Bible should have come down to us at least substantially in its original form.

Here we encounter a major difficulty. Our view of the Bible requires its textual integrity, and yet the Bible came into being in times and conditions which were less favourable to such integrity than those of our day. We are used to the comparative security which books enjoy in the age of printing. When manuscript was copied by hand from manuscript, at each copying mistakes and changes were introduced into the text with the result that of our thousands of New Testament manuscripts no two agree completely in text and the variations are innumerable.

This state of affairs might sound desperate, but it is not as bad as it sounds, and this for two reasons. The first is that early manuscripts

enable us to trace the text of the New Testament books back to a period near to the time of composition. The second reason is that scholars have evolved criteria which enable us to choose with fair confidence among the variants that the manuscripts offer.

The nineteenth century was a great time for the study of the New Testament text. Manuscripts were discovered and published right and left. Among them a few of the fourth and fifth centuries seemed to provide the oldest evidence for the text. Two, Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus, are in the British Museum, Vaticanus, which was thought to be the oldest and most important, is at Rome, Codex Ephraemi at Paris, and Codex Bezae, the most erratic, at Cambridge.

For long this picture was unmodified by the discovery and publication of Greek papyri from Egypt. Some New Testament fragments which came to light were ascribed to the third century, but they were too small to signify. The last twenty-five years have brought a change. Among the Chester Beatty Papyri are a fragmentary manuscript of the Gospels and Acts, another, relatively intact, of the Pauline Epistles, both of about A.D. 200, and a third with a large part of Revelation of about A.D. 250. Further there was published last December in Geneva the Bodmer Papyrus containing John 1:1-6:11, 6:35-14:26, again of about A.D. 200. Meanwhile, several smaller fragments have come to light dating from the second century. The earliest, a tiny piece of John, is older than A.D. 150.

When we contrast this state of affairs with the evidence for the text of most classical authors we can see how fortunate we are. For even the best preserved of the writers of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. we are in the main dependent on medieval manuscripts which are at the earliest not older than the ninth century A.D. Thus there is a gap of some twelve hundred years or more between these authors and their earliest manuscripts. If we agree, as scholars are coming increasingly to do, that the Gospel According to St. John was written at the end of the first century A.D., there is about a century between the composition of the book and the Geneva papyrus just mentioned.

If this were all the story, we could fold our hands in our felicity, knowing that nothing more need be done. Unfortunately, it is not so. The early witnesses for the New Testament, which make New Testament scholarship the envy of those less fortunate, reveal also that the variation in text between manuscript and manuscript existed already by A.D. 200.

Let us take our two manuscripts of about this date which contain parts of John, the Chester Beatty Papyrus and the Bodmer Papyrus. They are together extant for about seventy verses. Over these seventy verses they differ some seventy-three times apart from mistakes.

Further in the Bodmer Papyrus the original scribe has frequently corrected what he first wrote. At some places he is correcting his own mistakes but at others he substitutes one form of phrasing for another. At

about seventy-five of these substitutions both alternatives are known from other manuscripts independently. The scribe is in fact replacing one variant reading by another at some seventy places so that we may conclude that already in his day there was variation at these points.

It is worth considering how the scribe incorporated his variants. He may have copied the text from his exemplar and then have corrected it by another manuscript. This would mean that immediately behind the Bodmer Papyrus there were two older manuscripts which differed from each other in at least some seventy places.

Certain characteristics in the corrections suggest that the scribe came by his corrections in a different way. The corrections may have been written in the margin of his exemplar. This is not uncommon. For example, Sinaiticus has been corrected by more than one scribe in this way. If this suggestion is true we can reconstruct three generations in the history of our manuscript. In the first generation would be two grandparents. One of these would serve as exemplar for the copy of the next generation. The scribe of this copy would then note in the margin of the copy divergences in the text of the other grandparent. The scribe of the Bodmer Papyrus would use this manuscript with its marginal variants as his exemplar. He would first copy the text of his exemplar and then correct his copy from the marginal variants in the exemplar. If this hypothesis is true, then many of the differences between what our scribe first wrote and his subsequent corrections go back well into the second century.

Whatever we learn from our two papyri is confirmed by other evidence. We have many quotations from the New Testament in the works of early Christian writers from the time of Irenaeus (A.D. c. 180) onward. Their evidence is confirmed by the ancient New Testament translations. The oldest forms of the Latin and Syriac versions belong to the second century. Quotations and versions support our papyri in showing that already in the second century there was a considerable number of variant readings to our New Testament text.

This conclusion may seem disturbing at first sight, but on reflection we can see that there is something reassuring about it. It was pointed out earlier in this paper that at each copying of a text by hand changes are bound to occur. If we doubt this, we can copy out a long passage by hand from a printed text. Sooner or later we begin to make mistakes. Some of them we shall see at once and correct, others we shall notice only on reading our transcript over and others will escape our eye only to be noticed when someone else reads our copy. Jerome had this experience. We know from a letter of his that in his own lifetime his translation of the Psalter into Latin suffered changes, both mistakes and deliberate alterations.

Let us imagine that all our manuscripts of the New Testament could be traced back to a single ancestor of about A.D. 200, and that we had

this ancestor before us. We would be delivered from the multitude of variations that now beset us and would have to concern ourselves only with the text of our manuscript.

No manuscript is perfect, not even the author's copy. If we doubt this, we have only to look at one of our own manuscripts. As we read it over we will notice places where we want to correct what we have written. If our manuscript is long, some errors in it we may well overlook. When it is typed some of these errors will be corrected but others may be introduced. By and large it is probable that at each copying new errors will be introduced. Suppose that our manuscript of A.D. 200 is for parts of the New Testament the fifth copying, for parts the seventh copying and for parts the ninth copying. It will have a number of sheer mistakes quite apart from any deliberate changes or attempts at correction.

How would we correct these departures from the original form of the text? We would have no other manuscripts to consult, for all our other manuscripts would derive from this one faulty archetype of A.D. 200. Where we were not satisfied, we could correct only by guesswork or conjecture. To the subject of conjecture I will return later, but conjecture is not a satisfactory alternative to the errors of one manuscript.

From this it can be seen that the variations in our earliest manuscripts of the New Testament are a reassuring feature. They enable us to trace our text back to a date nearer our archetypes than any existing manuscript.

How far back can we get? Before we answer this question we must remember that behind our collection of the New Testament books as a whole lie smaller collections. The best known of these are the Four Gospels which came into being about A.D. 140 and the Pauline Epistles which were assembled some time in the second half of the first century.

Let us begin by considering the Gospels. Can we trace the text of our Gospels to a time when they circulated separately before the collection of the four Gospels was formed?

First, the Four Gospel Canon has played a large part in hypotheses, but it is surprising how few early manuscripts containing only the Four Gospels are known. The earliest demonstrable example seems to be the Washington manuscript, probably of the fourth century. We cannot always be certain of the contents of early manuscripts, but where we are certain, they contain either more, like the Chester Beatty Papyrus of the Gospels and Acts, or less, like the Bodmer Papyrus of St. John. This evidence, as far as it goes, does not bear out the suggestion that the Four Gospel Canon played a large part in the history of our text.

Next there is the evidence of the text itself. Manuscripts perhaps show greatest variety in Mark and least in Matthew and John with Luke coming in between the extremes. There are several possible explanations

for this. For example, the language of Mark may have been so individual that, even after the Four Gospel Canon was formed about A.D. 140, it may have invited the corrections of scribes to a greater extent than the other three Gospels.

There is, however, one consideration that makes this explanation unlikely. From Irenaeus onward we have indexes of the New Testament quotations from ancient Christian writers and they show that very soon after the Four Gospel Canon was formed Mark dropped very largely out of use. This does not allow a long enough time for this considerable number of variants to come into being.

Let us take a concrete example of such variation. In the Authorized Version of the Gospels we often meet the expression "answered and said". It is not an English expression any more than its equivalent in the Greek Gospels is Greek. It is a reproduction of Semitic idiom and foreign to both languages. Twentieth-century translators have been aware that the expression is un-English and have avoided it in their renderings. The scribes of the Gospel text were equally aware that it was not Greek. They sought not to eliminate it but to reduce its incidence.

How did they do this? If we take our modern printed texts which rest largely on the fourth-century manuscripts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, as an example of the degree of correction that texts were likely to undergo, we reach the following results for the Synoptic Gospels. Mark has about thirty examples of the expression "answered and said" in the current New Testament texts, but in the manuscripts there is evidence for about fifty. One or two of these may be suspicious but if we allow for five doubtful instances we are making generous provision. This means that out of about forty-five instances in the original Mark some thirty have survived in our modern texts and one-third have fallen casualties to the scribes of our manuscripts.

In Luke and Matthew the figures are different. In Luke there are about forty instances in our printed texts and some five more examples in our manuscripts so that originally there were about forty-five examples in this Gospel and one in fifteen of these has been eliminated by the scribes. In Matthew there is one example out of fifty-one.

These figures show a considerable disparity in the treatment of the three Gospels. Mark has suffered heavily, Luke has been moderately corrected and Matthew hardly at all. If this correction had taken place when the Canon of the Four Gospels was formed, or while the Four Gospels were associated in one book, we would have expected the correction to have been uniform throughout all of them or at any rate that Mark would not have been the most heavily corrected.

There is a reason for this last opinion. We have already noticed that Mark went out of use early. The Canon guaranteed that Mark would be copied with the other Gospels, but it could not guarantee that Mark would be given the same attention. It is the opinion of those who have

studied the text of the Gospels in the manuscripts that scribes interfered with the text of Mark less than with the text of the others.

These considerations suggest that Mark suffered the disproportionate correction that we have just noticed at a time when it was not part of the Four Gospel Canon but circulated independently and was in much greater use. These conditions would hold good for the period before A.D. 140.

Our arguments point to the conclusion that the tradition of the text of our Gospels does not begin with the introduction of the Four Gospel Canon but in an earlier period when each Gospel circulated independently. Our archetype for each of them must belong to this earlier time when many of the changes in our Gospel text were made.

We can see reasons for thinking that the text of our Gospels goes back to a time when each Gospel circulated independently before the Canon was formed, but can we say this of the Epistles? First, the Canon of the Epistles, or at any rate the nucleus of the Pauline Epistles, was formed earlier. If the Canon of the Four Gospels came into being about A.D. 140, the nucleus of the Canon of the Epistles was in being by the end of the first century. Secondly, no reasons have been shown for thinking that any Epistle, like Mark among the Gospels, remained in the Canon but dropped out of use after the Canon was formed. So we cannot use an Epistle as the criterion for the age of variants in the way that we have used Mark for the Gospels. Thirdly, we saw just now how we can study the correction of the Gospel text but there is no similar study for the Epistles. We have no studies of criteria comparable to "answered and said", for example. Search may reveal such tests, but they have still to be found.

Though those considerations suggest no answer to our question, there is one characteristic of our manuscripts that does. When Sir Frederic Kenyon finally published the Chester Beatty Papyrus of the Pauline Epistles, he included in his introduction figures showing the agreement and disagreement of the Papyrus with the principal manuscripts of the Epistles. These reveal significant variation in the relations of the Papyrus to the manuscripts from epistle to epistle. The Epistle to the Romans in particular stood apart from the others. If we leave the Papyrus out of consideration the relation of the manuscripts still varies from one epistle to another. This variation is most easily explicable if it goes back to a time when the Epistles circulated separately and not in a collection. This is most likely to have obtained before the Canon of the Pauline Epistles was formed.

This consideration is not as weighty as those brought forward for the Gospels but as far as it goes it points to the same conclusion. The tradition reaches back past the period when the New Testament books were circulating as constituents of a collection or canon to the time when each book circulated by itself.

If this conclusion is sound, our text goes back to a very early date, a time near the authors' copies. Can we determine its relation to those

copies themselves? More precisely, does our evidence enable us to recover what the authors wrote?

Before we answer this question, we may recall one probability. The authors' copies were not perfect. Even if the authors carefully revised them, it is likely that some faults survived. As in writing about the authors' copies we frequently assume that they were faultless, it is well to bear in mind the probabilities.

Now let us return to our question. In answering it we may have in mind two lines of argument. Along the one we may consider the condition of our text as it has come down to us, along the other we may examine conjectural improvements of passages where it is suggested that our whole tradition is wrong.

Let us take the first line of argument. Here we may consider the New Testament as a collection of first-century texts. As such does it contain anything conflicting with the history and conditions of the first century in general? We have an increasing knowledge of this period and our chances of detecting an intrusion of features from a later period into our texts are great. So far such an intrusion has not been demonstrated.

Our knowledge of the language and idiom of the time is detailed. We can detect the movement of language and even the trends in spelling. No one has so far shown that the New Testament is contaminated with the grammar or orthography of a later period.

We can go further. We have just argued about the New Testament as though it was a body of texts uniform in language and style. This is far from being true in detail. In the printed texts the works of the several authors are sharply and clearly distinguished linguistically. When we take into account the variations in the manuscripts as well, we find that these distinctions become even more pronounced.

This is not what we should look for, if the text had undergone any irremediable and considerable rehandling. Such revision might be expected to iron out differences and individual features, imposing on the text a smooth uniformity. If this is lacking to any noticeable degree, it is an argument in favour of the general soundness of our text.

There is in the New Testament a number of passages which present serious problems for the interpreter. We are aware that sometimes the solution has still to be found, but we are not confronted with the breakdowns in the text that we experience in some of the classical authors. In Aeschylus or Plautus, for example, we sometimes have no option but to conclude that the text is hopelessly corrupt.

This consideration leads us to our second line of argument. Are any of these conjectural restorations of the text clearly right? If this is so, then at these points the whole manuscript tradition is wrong.

Let us take one instance. John 19: 29 runs in the Authorized Version: "Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth." With

one exception our manuscript tradition agrees in having hyssop. Hyssop caused no difficulty to the ancient commentators as far as we know, and yet it is an unsatisfactory plant to use for this purpose. Unlike the reed which Mark mentions in this context, Mark 15: 36, it has no long firm stalk on which to fix the sponge. To meet this difficulty a sixteenth-century scholar, Camerarius, suggested that the evangelist wrote the word for javelin (ΥCOC) instead of the word for hyssop. The relevant Greek letters would run ΥCΩΠ instead of ΥCΩΠΩΠ. An early copyist wrote ΩΠ twice instead of once, the kind of mistake that frequently occurs in manuscripts. We know now that the reading ΥCΩΠ is to be found in one medieval Greek manuscript, though in it this reading was later corrected to ΥCΩΠΩΠ. It probably arose in the medieval manuscript through the opposite kind of mistake, the copying of the two letters once instead of twice.

The suggestion, javelin, has had wide acceptance. It is noteworthy that on the whole the translators have welcomed it more than the commentators. It is reproduced for example in the *Bible in Basic English*, Moffatt, Goodspeed, Rieu, Phillips, and Kingsley Williams.

Is this acceptance well founded? Alas, when we examine ΥCOC, "javelin", doubts appear. For them there are two grounds, first, the nature of the vocabulary of John, and, secondly, the meaning of ΥCOC itself.

John's vocabulary is limited. On one count it contains no more than 900 words in Greek and all but some twenty of these recur elsewhere in the New Testament, in the Greek Old Testament, in related texts, in the Apostolic Fathers, or in the non-literary papyri. On the other hand, it has no words common to it and the historians alone. By contrast ΥCOC occurs elsewhere only in historians or semi-historical writers. Thus in using a word like this the evangelist is going outside his normal range of vocabulary in an unparalleled way.

Let us take ΥCOC and examine it. As we saw it occurs only in a limited group of authors and is not a term of common speech. What is its meaning? It is used not for any kind of javelin but only for the Roman *pilum*. The Roman *pilum* was the weapon of legionary troops, not of other troops in the Roman Army. But no legionary troops were stationed in Judaea before A.D. 66. The troops under Pontius Pilate were, as we know, auxiliaries. Auxiliaries, not being legionary troops, would not be armed with a *pilum*. Consequently the soldiers round the Cross would not be so armed and the sponge of vinegar would not be elevated on a *pilum*. The javelin has no part in our story.

Thus we see that this plausible conjecture lands us in improbabilities and difficulties greater than those of the text of our manuscripts. It is true that the manuscript text has difficulties for the exegete, but these difficulties can be met in other ways. Thus the evangelist may have had in mind in his reference to hyssop its use in purification in connection with the *Passover*.

No other conjecture in the New Testament has had the same plausibility. Some have been taken up by this or that translator or commentator. Very often their popularity has been temporary as well as limited. All are open to serious objections.

We have discussed two directions along which the tradition of the text of the New Testament might prove imperfect. The condition of the text as it has come down to us might appear faulty. On the other hand, conjectures might establish themselves in the judgment of those concerned as necessary to the text. Our discussion has revealed neither kind of imperfection.

How does the state of the Greek New Testament text compare with that of the Greek Old Testament, the translation that was made in the last two hundred and fifty years B.C.? This translation, the Septuagint, has been handed down in many manuscripts the oldest of which are fragments dating from before the Christian era. Thus it too is in much better case than our classical authors.

It does not, however, show up under examination as well as the New Testament does. All our manuscripts of I Esdras and those of Daniel go back to ancestors which were defective. We know this because I Esdras lacks its beginning and end, and the Septuagint Daniel its beginning. There would, of course, be behind these ancestors older manuscripts without these defects but of them we have no independent knowledge.

Secondly, as we can see from a modern edition of the Septuagint at a number of places conjectures are incorporated into the text. For example, the form of the proper names has sometimes gone very much awry and we can usually arrive at a better form by comparison with the Hebrew.

Thus in two ways, the general condition of the text and the opportunity for conjecture, the Septuagint does not compare favourably with the New Testament. We would not suggest that it is a badly corrupted text but we cannot claim on its behalf that it is immune from corruption. This feature of its tradition may connect with two others. First, despite the date of the earliest fragments of the Septuagint, its manuscripts are in the main separated by a much larger interval from the period of translation than the New Testament manuscripts from the time of authorship. Secondly, if our examination of early papyri has shown that scribes almost from the beginning began to modify the New Testament text, the Septuagint invited alteration even more. It reproduces, and parts of it do so lavishly, Semitic idiom to a degree which has little parallel in the New Testament. It was open to constant correction to forms of the Hebrew text which differed from that from which the Septuagint translation was made. Finally, like the New Testament, it was affected by the stylistic canons of a later age but for a longer time.

If a comparison with the Septuagint confirms our view about the reliability of the New Testament text, can we put this view into practical

terms? Can we in effect say what our conclusions are likely to mean, for example, for the man who sets out to construct a text of the New Testament?

Before we answer these questions we must recall two facts. First it has been pointed out that, if we are to judge by the experience of writers, the authors' copies cannot be assumed to be flawless, and, if we set out to correct and improve everything which seems faulty, we soon find ourselves correcting our authors and doing what the second-century scribes did.

Secondly, it is well to remember that we have taken for granted much that is involved in the construction of a text. For example, we have not discussed how we choose between readings. Silence about this has been deliberate because such a topic would require at least a paper to itself where procedure could be considered in some detail. This silence would be serious only if behind it was the recognition that we lacked the methods whereby we could make a defensible choice from variant readings. Most students of the subject would recognize that this is far from being the state of affairs.

We may now return to our question and to it make short answer. We may assume as a rule of thumb that at each point the true text has survived somewhere or other among our manuscripts. This assumption, of course, cannot be proved unless we have before us the authors' copies to test our conclusions. This we cannot expect to do and so its general probability must rest on the considerations we have brought forward.

To summarize these we may say that we have unusually early manuscripts of the New Testament. They vary among themselves, but this very variety is a ground for confidence that the tradition of our text goes back to an early date. Further, it seems to antedate the formulation of the Canon of the New Testament as a whole and the appearance of the smaller Canons of the Four Gospels and probably of the Pauline Epistles. In keeping with this is the general impression of soundness that the New Testament text makes and the fact that no conjecture has really succeeded in establishing itself or meeting all the requirements of criticism.

If this argument justifies our rule of thumb, we may proceed to apply it with reasonable confidence. It should result in the provision of a text which at any rate does at all significant points give us what the authors wrote. If this can be achieved, then the suggestion that the place of the Bible in Christian belief and practice requires its textual integrity does not lead to difficulty. The requirements can be met, even if it calls for much scholarly labour to do so.