

Sunday, December 16, 2018—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 70 Transmission & Textual Criticism: The Importance of Presuppositions

Introduction

- In [Lesson 69](#) we began our study of the transmission of the text by noting its connection with the promise/doctrine of preservation. In short, we noted that a consideration of the text’s transmission through time is, in fact, a study of the history of preservation.
- Recall also that transmission deals with the “kernels” or the words given under inspiration and how they have come down to us from the 1st century, not the “husks” or physical pieces of papyrus or parchment that the words were originally written on.
- In this lesson we want to fix our gaze on two primary points: 1) the connection between the transmission of the New Testament text and textual criticism and 2) the importance of presuppositions and how they impact the practice of textual criticism.

Transmission & Textual Criticism

- When discussing the transmission of the New Testament text, one cannot avoid talking about the topic of textual criticism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* “the definitive record of the English language” contains the following entry for “criticism, n.”
 - “2. b. *spec.* The critical science which deals with the text, character, composition, and origin of literary documents, *esp.* those of the Old and New Testaments.
 - **textual criticism:** that whose object is to ascertain the genuine text and meaning of an author.”
- Other definitions for textual criticism include:
 - “The process of attempting to ascertain the original wording of a text.” (Google)
 - “Textual criticism is a branch of textual scholarship, philology, and literary criticism that is concerned with the identification of textual variants in either manuscripts or printed books.” (Wikipedia)
 - “The study of a literary work that aims to establish the original text.” ([Merriam-Webster](#))
- Professional text critic Dr. Bart. D. Ehrman defines textual criticism as:
 - “. . . a technical term for the science of restoring the “original” words of a text from manuscripts that have altered them.” (Ehrman, 5)
- Likewise, Dr. Floyd Nolan Jones offers the following more extensive description of textual criticism also known as “lower criticism:”

- “Lower criticism (or textual criticism) means that we attempt to determine the text itself from a study of the various Greek manuscripts, old versions, lectionaries, etc. currently available and their history. . . With the aid of these ancient manuscripts and versions, the textual critic seeks to bring the text to the highest possible level of accuracy. In sharp contrast to higher criticism, lower criticism deals with concrete phenomena of actual readings found in manuscripts.” (Jones, 51)
- Given the fact that the original autographs (“husks”) upon which the penman of scriptures wrote by inspiration are lost to history, one can see how a discussion of textual transmission is going to involve a discussion of textual criticism.
- Dr. Edward F. Hills offers the following practical illustration regarding the transmission of the New Testament text:
 - “Old books have sometimes been likened to little ships which have sailed across the tides of time, bearing within themselves their precious freight of ancient knowledge and culture. None of these books, however, has enjoyed an uninterrupted voyage over the century-stretching seas. The vessels which commended the journey have perished, and their cargoes have been subject to frequent re-shipment in the course of their perilous passage. The original manuscripts of these ancient works have long since been lost, and they have come down to us only in copies and copies of copies, which were produced by the pens of scribes during the progress of the intervening ages. And just as cargoes of merchandise are likely to incur damage whenever they are transferred from one vessel to another, so the copying and recopying of manuscripts has resulted in some damage to their cargoes of words, which are commonly called their texts. Textual criticism, therefore, is the attempt to estimate the damage and, if possible, to repair it.

Has the text of the New Testament, like those of other ancient books, been damaged during its voyage over the seas of time? Are the same methods of textual criticism to be applied to it that are applied to the texts of other ancient books?” (Hills, 1)
- The critical question is the following; under what set of presuppositions does the textual critic engage in his or her craft? The extant data is the same (manuscripts, versions, lectionaries, etc.), yet textual critics have come to widely different conclusions as to the nature or character of the New Testament text.

The Importance of Presuppositions: How Does One Approach Textual Criticism?

- Dr. Hills has much to say about how one’s presuppositions ought to impact how one approaches the New Testament text. If the scriptures came from God via divine inspiration, then they are set apart from other ancient books of human origin and should be treated differently.
 - “Since the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the New Testament has in all ages stimulated the copying of these sacred books, it is evident that this doctrine is important for the history of the New Testament text, no matter whether it be a true doctrine or only a belief of the Christian Church. But what if it be a true doctrine? What if the original New Testament manuscripts were actually inspired of God? If the doctrine of the divine

inspiration of the New Testament is a true doctrine, then New Testament textual criticism is different from the textual criticism of ordinary books.” (Hills, 2)

- Hills points out that belief in the promise of preservation logically follows belief in the divine inspiration of scripture.
 - “If the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testament Scriptures is a true doctrine, the doctrine of the providential preservation of the Scriptures must also be a true doctrine. It must be that down through the centuries God has exercised a special, providential control over the copying of the Scriptures and the preservation and use of the copies, so that trustworthy representatives [note that Hills stops short of demanding verbatim identity of wording] of the original text have been available to God’s people in every age. God must have done this, for if He gave the Scriptures to His Church by inspiration as the perfect and final revelation of His will, then it is obvious that He would not allow this revelation to disappear or undergo any alteration of its fundamental character [preservation secures the transmission of the substantive doctrinal content of the text without demanding exact identity of wording].” (Hills, 2)
- Next, Hills points out that if these two doctrinal presuppositions are true, they must impact how one approaches the New Testament text in terms of textual criticism.
 - “If, now, the Christian Church has been correct down through the ages in her fundamental attitude toward the Old and New Testaments, if the doctrines of the divine inspiration and providential preservation of these Scriptures are true doctrines, then the textual criticism of the New Testament is different from that of uninspired writings of antiquity. The textual criticism of any book must take into account the conditions under which the original manuscripts were written and also those under which the copies of these manuscripts were made and preserved. But if the doctrines of the divine inspiration and providential preservation of the Scriptures are true, then the original New Testament manuscripts were written under special conditions, under the inspiration of God, and the copies were made and preserved under special conditions, under the singular care and providence of God.

The New Testament textual criticism of the man who believes the doctrines of the divine inspiration and providential preservation of the Scriptures to be true ought to differ from that of the man who does not so believe. The man who regards these doctrines as merely mistaken beliefs of the Christian Church is consistent if he gives them only a minor place in his treatment of the New Testament text, a place so minor as to leave his New Testament textual criticism essentially the same as that of any other ancient book. But the man who holds these doctrines to be true is inconsistent unless he gives them a prominent place in his treatment of the New Testament text, a place so prominent as to make his New Testament criticism different from that of other ancient books, for if these doctrines are true, they demand such a place.” (Hills, 2-3)

- Therefore, men such as Daniel Wallace and W. Edward Glenny go to great lengths to deny the Biblical promise of preservation. If the Bible teaches its own preservation, then its witness cannot be ignored when it comes to textual criticism and the transmission of the text. To varying

degrees, text critics have either embraced or ignored the presuppositions set forth by Dr. Hills. As a result, two very different types or approaches to textual criticism have emerged.

- “Thus there are two methods of New Testament textual criticism, the consistently Christian method and the naturalistic method. These two methods deal with the same materials, the same Greek manuscripts, the same translations and biblical quotations, but they interpret those materials differently. The consistently Christian method interprets the materials of New Testament textual criticism in accordance with the doctrines of the divine inspiration and providential preservation of the Scriptures. The naturalistic method interprets the same materials in accordance with its own doctrine that the New Testament is nothing more than a human book.” (Hills, 3)
- Dr. Thomas Holland, author of *Crowned With Glory: The Bible from Ancient Text to Authorized Version*, points out how the doctrine of preservation impacts the practice of textual criticism:
 - “Biblical preservation does not demand the rejection of textual criticism. It is just as essential for the student of biblical preservation to be aware of the textual evidence as it is for any student of textual criticism. The biblical preservationists, however, first approaches the subject theologically and then considers the existing textual evidence, usually in light of the promise of preservation.” (Holland, 6)
- Drs. Brooke Foss Westcott and John Fenton Anthony Hort, the architects of the modern Critical Text which serves as the textual basis for nearly all modern versions began their work with the presupposition that the Bible is like any other book. In the introduction to their [*The New Testament in the Original Greek*](#) published in 1881, Westcott and Hort stated the following regarding the approach to textual criticism they adopted when doing their work:
 - “The principles of criticism explained in the foregoing section hold good for all ancient texts preserved in a plurality of documents. **In dealing with the text of the New Testament no new principle whatever is needed or legitimate.** (Westcott and Hort, 73)
- In other words, the Bible is an ordinary human work and should be studied using the same methods of textual criticism that one would use for Homer’s *Iliad* or Plato’s *Republic*. This presupposition is no doubt a result of their low view of inspiration. When speaking about “primitive corruption” in the text, Dr. Hort states:
 - “Little is gained by speculating as to the precise point at which such corruptions came in. They may be due to the original writer, or his amanuensis if he wrote from dictation, or they may be due to one of the earliest transcribers.” (Westcott and Hort, 280-281)
- On this point Hort stands in opposition to modern Evangelical scholarship in that he allows for “corruption” to have entered the text via the “original writer.” Such a position explains why Hort is reluctant to ascribe infallibility to the text in any form. In a letter addressed to J.B. Lightfoot dated May 1, 1860, Hort stated in part:
 - “I am convinced that any view of the Gospels, which distinctly and consistently recognizes for them a natural and historical origin (whether under a special Divine

superintendence or not) and assumes that they did not drop down ready-made from heaven, must and will be ‘startling’ to an immense portion of educated English people. But so far, at least, Westcott and I are perfectly agreed, and I confess I had hoped that you (Lightfoot) would assent. . . If you make a decided conviction of the absolute infallibility of the N.T. practically a *sine quo non* for co-operation, I fear I could not join you, even if you were willing to forget your fears about the origin of the Gospels. I am most anxious to find the N.T. infallible, and have a strong sense of the Divine purpose guiding all its parts; but I cannot see how the exact limits of such guidance can be ascertained except by unbiased a posteriori criticism. . . [Regarding the question of “Providence” in Biblical history Hort writes] Most strongly I recognize it; but I am not prepared to say that it necessarily involves absolute infallibility.” (Hort, 419-421)

- This is the type of textual criticism that Dr. Hills is referring to when he talks about the “naturalistic method.” He is speaking about an approach to the scriptures that doubts their supernatural origin, doubts their infallibility even in the original autographs, and treats the Bible as though it were any other book. Such was the presuppositional approach of Drs. Westcott and Hort.
- Later in this book, Dr. Hills warns again about the dangers of “naturalistic” criticism when it comes to one’s approach to the Bible.
 - “Its origin is eternal, its inspiration infallible, its preservation providential and sure. In it God reveals himself as the almighty Creator God, the faithful Covenant God, and triune Savior God. In it Christ reveals Himself to sinners as Prophet, Priest, and King. Hence the Bible is unique! No other book is like the Bible. And because this is so, we must reject every type of naturalistic Bible study, every tendency to deal with the Bible as other ancient books are dealt with. Above all we must be alert to the dangers of naturalistic New Testament textual criticism. For this is naturalistic Bible study of a most insidious sort. It begins by persuading an unsuspecting Christian to ignore God’s providential preservation of the Scriptures and then leads him on to ignore other divine aspects of the Bible until almost before he knows it he finds himself bereft of faith and almost completely modernistic in outlook.” (Hills, 169)
- There are a couple points here that need highlighting. First, recall from our study of the Historically-Determined Models of canonicity in Lesson 61 that neutrality, when it comes to dealing with the Bible, is impossible.
 - “One problem with the so-called neutral standards of modern historical inquiry that this model is reliant upon is that they are founded upon non-Christian and Enlightenment assumptions. Is taking a neutral approach even consistent with the epistemological position advocated for in scripture? God’s word teaches that a religiously neutral approach to historical study is not possible. . . Since neutrality when it comes to the truth is not a Biblical virtue, following it as a means of authenticating the authority of the canon seems like an unwise and unscriptural nonstarter. Moreover, attempting to authenticate the canon based on a supposedly independent neutral standard ultimately subjects the canon to an authority outside itself.” ([Lesson 61](#))

- The same could be said for so-called neutral or naturalistic textual criticism—it subjects the Biblical text to a system of authority outside of itself. Instead of judging textual data through the prism of scripture, naturalistic textual criticism subjects the scriptures to their so-called rules of neutral text criticism.

Case Study: The Agnosticism of Bart D. Ehrman

- Second, we see in the academic career of Dr. Bart Ehrman an example of the loss of faith that Hills predicted would result from embracing the naturalistic method of textual criticism. Ehrman is a New York Times Bestselling author and professor of Religious Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is one of North America's leading scholars in his field, having written and edited thirty books, including three college textbooks. He has also achieved acclaim at the popular level, authoring five *New York Times* bestsellers. Ehrman's work focuses on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the development of early Christianity. (Wikipedia Entry) After attending Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, where he learned the prevailing Evangelical orthodoxy regarding the original autographs only being inspired and inerrant, Ehrman went on to study textual criticism under Bruce M. Metzger at Princeton Theological Seminary. Being theologically reared in the prevailing orthodoxy, Ehrman was not taught to believe in the preservation of scripture, one of the key components to a “consistently Christian” approach to textual criticism, according to Dr Edward F. Hills. As a result of leaving preservation out of his paradigm, as Ehrman did his textual critical work he eventually had a crisis of faith as it pertained to the doctrine of inspiration. Ehrman recounts the following in the introduction to his 2005 book *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*:

- **“If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don’t have the very words of scripture? In some places, as we will see, we simply cannot be sure that we have reconstructed the original text accurately.** It’s a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don’t even know what the words are!

This became a problem for my view of inspiration, **for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place.** If he wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to them (and possibly even given them the words in a language they could understand, rather than Greek and Hebrew). **The fact that we don’t have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn’t perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.”** (Ehrman, 11)

- The following paragraph captures the net effect of all this upon Ehrman’s views on inspiration and the Bible. In the end, Ehrman takes the naturalistic/rationalistic starting point of the current Evangelical Orthodoxy to its logical conclusion; the Bible was not inspired and is a human work that is no different from any other book.

- “In short, my study of the Greek New Testament, and my investigation into the manuscripts that contain it, led to a radical rethinking of my understanding of what the Bible is. This was a seismic change for me. Before this—starting with my born-again experience in high school, through my fundamentalist days at Moody, and on through my evangelical days at Wheaton—my faith had been based completely on a certain view of the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant word of God. Now I no longer saw the Bible that way. **The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book.** Just as many scribes had copied, and changed, the texts of scripture, **so too had human authors originally written the texts of scripture. This was a human book from beginning to end.** It was written by different human authors at different times and in different places to address different needs. Many of these authors no doubt felt they were inspired by God to say what they did, but they had their own perspectives, their own beliefs, their own views, their own needs, their own desires, their own understandings, their own theologies; and these perspectives, beliefs, views, needs, desires, understandings, and theologies informed everything they said. In all these ways they differed from one another. Among other things, that meant that Mark did not say the same thing that Luke said because he didn’t mean the same thing as Luke. John is different from Matthew—not the same. Paul is different from Acts. And James is different from Paul. Each author is a human author and needs to be read for what he (assuming they were all men) has to say, not assuming that what he says is the same, or conformable to, or consistent with what every other author has to say. **The Bible, at the end of the day, is a very human book.**” (Ehrman, 11-12)

- Ehrman ended up “bereft of faith and almost completely modernistic in outlook” because he took the naturalistic approach to the text that he was taught at Bible College to its logical conclusion. This is exactly what Hills forecasted would happen when one follows the naturalistic approach to its logical end.

Daniel B. Wallace on the Fideistic Approach

- Despite Ehrman’s agnosticism, one of his chief antagonists in the contemporary debate, Daniel B. Wallace, still ridicules those who would operate on the basis of faith based (fideistic) presuppositions when conducting textual criticism.
- Wallace excoriates the fideistic (faith) approach arguing that the theological *a priori* belief in preservation has “no place in textual criticism.”
 - “The fideistic formula violates all known historical data. Such a dogmatic affirmation results in a procrusteanizing of the data on a massive scale in the name of orthodoxy. For example, the Byzantine text did not become the majority until the ninth century—and even then “majority” must be qualified: There are almost twice as many Latin MSS as there are Greek and, to my knowledge, none of them belongs to the Byzantine text.” (Wallace in *JETS*, 202)
 - “In sum, a theological *a priori* has no place in textual criticism. Since this is the case it is necessary to lay aside fideism in dealing with the evidence. The question, since we are

dealing fundamentally with historical inquiry, is not what is possible but what is probable. With the stance of faith of the traditionalists in place, textual criticism becomes so intertwined with orthodoxy that the evidence cannot objectively be interpreted. But once dogma is evacuated from the discussion, no position can be comfortable merely with what is possible.” (Wallace in *JETS*, 204)

- Notice plainly what Wallace is asserting: 1) the doctrine of preservation has no place in the discipline of textual criticism, 2) the faith approach is a hindrance to dealing with the historical evidence, and 3) only when the doctrine of preservation (dogma) is abandoned can one objectively evaluate the historical data.
- Explaining away the doctrine of preservation is just as central to Wallace’s position as faith is to the preservationist. This is why he must declare that passages such as Isaiah 40:8 and I Peter 1:23-25 do not assert a doctrine of preservation. He must first explain away the verses before he can advance his so-called objective argument.
 - “Traditionalists make the rather facile assumption that when God’s word is mentioned the reference must be to the written text—specifically, the text of the NT. Yet neither the written text nor the NT per se is in view in these passages. The most satisfactory exegesis of all such passages is that they are statements concerning either divine ethical principles (i.e., more laws that cannot be violated without some kind of consequence) or the promise of fulfilled prophecy.” (Wallace in *JETS*, 202-203)
- Wallace is arguing for a naturalistic approach to textual criticism using rationalistic means. This approach is rooted in the notion that the Bible is the same as another book and should be approached by the same principles. This is the approach that caused Ehrman to view the Bible as a purely human book.

Conclusion

- The historic Protestant belief in the promise of preservation was abandoned in the late 19th century in favor of rationalistic presuppositions that treated the Biblical text like it was any ordinary book. The result has been catastrophic upon the body of Christ in general and the Protestant movement specifically. As a result, two different diametrically opposed approaches to textual criticism and the transmission of the text are wrestling for acceptance in the Christian community.
- The point of this lesson has been to look at how governing presuppositions impact one’s approach to the New Testament text. Divergent presuppositional starting points have given way to two fundamentally different approaches to transmission and textual criticism. Essentially, was the text preserved or was it lost and in need of reconstruction? We will consider this question in our next lesson.

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