

Sunday, January 13, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 72 Approaches to Transmission: Preservation or Reconstruction, Part 2 (Ehrman vs. Wallace: Absolute Certainty or Total Despair?)

Review

- In Lessons 70 and 71 we dealt with the importance of presuppositions and how they impact one’s approach to the transmission of the New Testament text. In doing so, we sought to demonstrate that there are two presuppositional approaches: 1) belief in the promise of preservation and 2) denial of the promise of preservation. These two presuppositional approaches lead to two different types of text criticism: 1) the consistently Christian model which judges all the data through the prism of scripture and 2) the naturalistic approach which treats the Bible as though it were any other book. This in turn facilitates two different approaches to the Biblical text: 1) identifying what God has preserved through time and history or 2) the loss, recovery, and reconstruction approach of modern textual criticism.
- In the conclusion to Lesson 71 we discussed certainty versus uncertainty in the transmission of the New Testament text. Please recall James R. White’s assertion that “the desire for *absolute certainty*” is the “glue” that holds the King James Only position [note that I reject KJO as a descriptor for my position] together. (White, 93) White then falsely ascribes this view to Dr. Edward F. Hills the author of *The King James Version Defended*. Instead of arguing for *absolute certainty*, Dr. Hills argued for “maximum certainty.”
 - “In other words, God does not reveal every truth with equal clarity. In biblical textual criticism, as in every department of knowledge, there are still some details in regard to which we must be content to remain uncertain. But the special providence of God has kept these uncertainties down to a *minimum*. Hence, if we believe it is the special providential preservation of the Scriptures and make this the leading principle of our biblical textual criticism, we obtain *maximum certainty*, all the certainty that any mere man can obtain, all the certainty that we need. For we are led by the logic of faith to the Masoretic Hebrew text, to the New Testament Textus Receptus, and to the King James Version.” (Hills, 224)
- There is a big difference between “maximum certainty” (Hills) and “absolute certainty” (White). Maximum is not absolute. White is ascribing to Hills something Hills never said. Regarding the matter, Dr. Theodore P. Letis states the following regarding the position of Dr. Hills:
 - “Here we see an example of a classically trained text critic [Hills], well familiar with the rules of semantics, of logic and, of rhetoric, offering a finely tuned and nuanced argument in one direction, while Mr. White publicly misrepresents him, steering him down a path Dr. Hills was consciously repudiating, and advocating that others avoid. The irony of Mr. White’s earlier homily on honesty is palpable.” (Letis, 228)
- If a position regarding transmission/textual criticism based upon the presupposition of preservation provides “maximum certainty” as to the identity of the New Testament text, then what would a paradigm predicated on the assumptions of loss, recovery, and reconstruction produce? It would bequeath to the body of Christ a position of “maximum uncertainty,” or a Bible that was only as certain as the latest archeological discoveries.

- Therefore, in conclusion, we observed the following in Lesson 71 regarding the two different approaches to transmission discussed in the lesson:
 - Preservationist Approach = Maximum Certainty
 - Reconstructionist Approach = Maximum Uncertainty

Ehrman vs. Wallace: Absolute Certainty or Total Despair?

- Since teaching Lesson 71 on Sunday, December 23, 2018, I have finished reading two books of significant importance to this topic: 1) *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* by Dr. Bart D. Ehrman and 2) *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament* edited by Daniel B. Wallace.
- Originally written in 1993, the central thesis of *The Orthodox Corruption of Scriptures* is that proto-orthodox scribes altered the New Testament text as it was being transmitted to strengthen the doctrine of Christ (Christology) against their heretical opponents. The following quote summarizes the book's key assertions:
 - "I nonetheless take my overarching thesis to be established: proto-orthodox scribes of the second and third centuries occasionally modified their texts of Scripture in order to make them coincide more closely with Christological views embraced by the party that would seal its victory at Nicea and Chalcedon." (Ehrman, 321)
- In other words, Ehrman argues that many of the textual variants present in the New Testament text were the result of orthodox or believing scribes altering texts to strengthen their Christological position in the heresy debates of the second and third centuries.
- *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* was updated in 2011 by Oxford University Press to include a new Afterward penned by Dr. Ehrman. In this Afterward, Dr. Ehrman discusses the state of textual criticism and the impact of his book on the discipline in the intermittent twenty years (1993-2011). There is much we will say in future lessons about Ehrman's work and the ire it has fostered within the Christian Evangelical community. For now, we will limit our comments to what Ehrman states in the Afterward regarding the prospect of textual critics ever reconstructing the autographic text of scripture. Regarding the gospel of Matthew, Ehrman writes:
 - "... So we might ask: how many changes were made to the Gospel of Matthew in the early second century? Or in the first two decades after it first appeared? Or in the first twelve months after it was put in circulation? The problem is that we have no way of knowing. If the trajectory model is applied, we would have to say that it was changed to a very considerable degree. Even more frustrating, there is no way to know what specific changes were made in the text then. Nor can we know how the earliest changes—minor, major, radical—affected the entire manuscript tradition for the next 1,400 years.

To talk about the original text of Matthew, then, appears to mean talking about a phantom. We do not have it, we cannot reconstruct it, and we will probably never be able to reconstruct it.

This is the practical problem with talking about the original text, and it is the chief reason many textual critics now avoid using the term original, opting instead to use other more precise and defensible phrases, such as “the earliest attainable form of the text. As difficult and insurmountable as this practical problem with “the original” is, there are even bigger problems, which might be thought of as more (though not exclusively) theoretical. One aspect of the theoretical problem involves how even to imagine what the “original” text of the New Testament would be. We can expose the issue by examining the traditional objective of the text-critical endeavor: the reconstruction of a text. What should we be looking for when we try to establish a biblical text?” (Ehrman, 343-344)

- Later in the Afterward, Ehrman states the following regarding the ability of text critics to reconstruct the “original” text of the New Testament using the modern eclectic method advanced by practitioners of the discipline.
 - “. . . But one is still left with the question: should textual critics strive to reconstruct the earliest attainable form of the text? . . . The eclectic text that results from the critical effort to reconstruct the earliest form of the text, as I pointed out, produces in every case a text that is nowhere attested and may well never have been attested. Why should this form of the text [NA28 or USB5] be privileged, for example, by being the text that is printed with variants from it being relegated to an apparatus?” (Ehrman, 349-350)
- Understand what Ehrman is saying; can the textual choices of text critics using an eclectic method in the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries recreate the autographic/original text of the first century? For Ehrman the answer appears to be an emphatic no! As I have said before, this position is non-falsifiable. How can one know that they have reconstructed that which they have never seen?
- Ehrman’s work in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (1993) and *Misquoting Jesus* (2005) has aroused the ire of many Evangelical text critics and scholars. Let me be clear, I do not agree with Ehrman regarding his agnosticism or the state of the New Testament text. I do, however, read his works with great fascination because Ehrman represents a voice within the academy of textual criticism who is willing to be honest regarding where their established canons of criticism logically lead.
- One such scholar who does not agree with Ehrman’s conclusions is Dr. Daniel B. Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary. In 2011, Dr. Wallace edited a book titled *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament* the goal of which is to present an Evangelical response to Ehrman’s work in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (1993) and *Misquoting Jesus* (2005).
- Wallace views Ehrman as the opposite end of the theological spectrum from King James Only (a term I do not use to describe myself) believers whom he has spilt much ink refuting.

- “For well over a century, the principal attacks on the earliest MSS of the NT have come from the far right, theologically speaking. Most of the attackers are fanatics, but there are some scholars among them. Occasionally, vitriolic language comes from even those who work with the Greek text and thus, in some measure, stand apart from the Bible thumping preachers of America’s backwaters. They speak of the early manuscripts as “bastard Bibles” and coming from a “sewer pipe.”

Such verbal abuse might be expected from the ultraconservative wing, because their method is dictated, from beginning to end, by their theological presuppositions [This is what I have been trying to highlight in Lessons 70 and 71. Wallace views those who function with Biblical presuppositions towards the Bible, namely with a belief in the promise of preservation as “far right,” “fanatics,” “Bible-thumping,” and “backwater”]. But in recent years, the attack on the earliest witnesses has also come from the left side of the theological aisle. Liberals, too, have their fanatics, some of whom may be bona fide scholars but with expertise far removed from textual matters. . .

Things have changed in the last few years, however: some respectable textual critics have joined the ranks of the scornful. Bart Ehrman—a scholar with impeccable credentials in textual criticism—has arguably led the charge.” (Wallace, 19)

- As one can see, Wallace cannot help but admit that Ehrman has the academic pedigree to speak with authority from within the discipline of textual criticism. Having positioned King James Only believers on the far right and Bart Ehrman on the far left, Wallace proceeds to outline how there are two attitudes that need to be avoided: 1) absolute certainty and 2) total despair.
 - “To begin with, there are two attitudes that we should try to avoid: absolute certainty and total despair. On the one side are the King James Only advocates; they are absolutely certain that the KJV, in every place, **exactly** represents the original text. . . On the other side are a few radical scholars who are so skeptical that no piece of data, no hard fact, is safe in their hands. It all turns to putty because all views are created equal. If everything is equally possible, then no view is more probable than any other view.” (Wallace, 22)
- To be fair, Wallace claims that he is not sure exactly where Ehrman falls on this spectrum.
 - “So you can see my dilemma. I am not sure what Ehrman believes. Is the task done? Have we essentially recovered the wording of the original text? Or should we be hyperskeptical about the whole enterprise? It seems that Ehrman puts a far more skeptical spin on things when speaking in the public square than he does when speaking to professional colleges [Earlier, on page 20, Wallace stated, “There is often a gulf between those “inside” a particular scholarly discipline and those on the outside. When outsiders hear what insiders are talking about, sometimes they can get quite alarmed.”].” (Wallace, 25)
- Despite not being sure where Ehrman fits on the spectrum between “absolute certainty” and “total despair,” Wallace identifies the following five points upon which he agrees with Ehrman.

- ”1. The handwritten copies of the NT contain a lot of differences. We are not sure exactly what the number is, but the best estimate is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 variants. This means, as Ehrman is fond of saying, that there are more variants in the MSS than there are words in the NT.
2. The vast bulk of these differences affect virtually nothing.
3. We concur on the wording of the original text almost all the time.
4. We are even in harmony over several well-known or controversial passages:
 - Mark 16:9-20—Here Jesus tells his disciples that they can drink poison and handle snakes and not get hurt. I agree with Ehrman that this passage is not part of the original text of Mark.
 - John 7:53-8:11—We both agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery was not part of the original text of John. It is my favorite passage that is *not* in the Bible.
 - I John 5:7—The King James Bible says, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.” This would be the most explicit statement about the Trinity in the Bible, but it is definitely not part of the original text. This fact has been known by scholars for more than half a millennium.
 - Mark 1:41—Although most MSS here say that Jesus was moved with compassion when he healed the leper; we both agree that the original text probably said that he was angry when he did so. One of Ehrman’s finest pieces is his provocatively titled article “A Leper in the Hands of an Angry Jesus.” He there gave very strong evidence that Mark 1:41 spoke of Jesus’ anger rather than his compassion. I agree.
5. We both are of the same mind that the orthodox scribes occasionally changed the NT text to bring it more into conformation with their views.” (Wallace, 20-21)

- After highlighting his points of agreement with the liberal Ehrman, Wallace states the following:
 - “All these agreements raise a fundamental point: even though we are looking at the same textual problems and arriving at the same answers most of the time, conservatives are still conservative, and liberals are still liberal.

What is the issue then? The text is not the basic area of our disagreement; the interpretation of the text is. Even here, it is not so much the interpretation of the text as the interpretation of how the textual variants arose and how significant those variants are—that is where our real differences lie. . . Ehrman sees in the textual variants something more pernicious, more sinister, more conspiratorial, and therefore more controlled than I do.” (Wallace, 21-22)

- Understand what Wallace is saying. He and Ehrman agree on just about everything except how to explain how *certain* textual variants arose. According to Wallace, Ehrman is a liberal because he disagrees with him regarding his interpretation of the origin of some but not all textual variants. Therefore, Wallace is trying to thread the needle between two approaches to textual criticism that he views as excessive and conspiratorial: 1) the presuppositional faith-based approach of preservationists (“absolute certainty”) and 2) the “total despair” approach of the liberals that he stops short of hanging around Ehrman’s neck. This, however, does not prevent Wallace from calling both “KJVers” and Ehrman “conspiratorial” in footnote fifteen found on pages 25 and 26:
 - “One other comparison can be made: Both Ehrman and KJVers have a major point in agreement. They both view early scribes as having almost conspiratorial motive behind them. The basic difference is that KJVers think that heretics corrupted the text, while Ehrman thinks that orthodox scribes did. Of course, Ehrman is not adamantly against the early Alexandrian manuscripts. But it does seem that his overriding criterion for determining the wording of the original [as seen in *Orthodox Corruption*] is that if a reading even gives off a faint scent of perhaps being an orthodox corruption, that trumps all other consideration, both external and internal.” (Wallace, 25-26)
- Wallace admits above that he and Ehrman agree that “orthodox scribes occasionally changed the NT text to bring it more into conformation with their views.” Therefore, one is left with the impression that Ehrman is only liberal and/or conspiratorial when he does not agree with Wallace. Consequently, one is left to wonder the following, when Wallace and Ehrman agree, as they do most of time, are they equally liberal and conspiratorial? The answer reveals that Wallace is trying to have his cake and eat it too. Ehrman, a “highly credentialed” member of the academy of textual critics has taken the discipline in a direction that Wallace does not like. What is saving Wallace from joining Ehrman? It is his *a priori* or *presuppositional* faith-based belief that God inspired his word i.e., his belief in the doctrine of inspiration. So, in a major twist of irony, the only thing saving Wallace from joining Ehrman is a faith-based presupposition a notion that Wallace repudiates as the starting point for conducting textual criticism and studying transmission.

Conclusion

- The bottom line is this; all this confusion was foisted upon the body of Christ by the adversary in order to engender doubt as to the word of God. All this confusion is avoidable if the body of Christ would just allow God’s word to be the authority.
 - Genesis 3:1
 - II Corinthians 11:3
 - I Corinthians 1:18-31
 - I Corinthians 2:5

- I Corinthians 3:18-23
- As we are still beginning our study of transmission or the history of preservation it would be good for us to recall our governing presuppositions set forth in Lesson 2:
 - God exists. (Psalms 14:1)
 - God has magnified His word above His own name. (Psalms 138:2)
 - God’s word is eternally settled in heaven. (Psalms 119:89)
 - God, through the process of inspiration, has communicated His word to mankind. (II Timothy 3:16 and II Peter 1:21)
 - God’s words were written down so that they could be made eternally available to men. (Isaiah 30:8 and I Peter 1:23)
 - God promised to preserve that which He inspired. (Psalms 12:6-7)
- Following these presuppositions will not allow us to take a naturalistic or so-called neutral approach to textual criticism and transmission. Therefore, the believing approach to the Biblical text is that of the preservationist not the reconstructionist.
- While some King James advocates may indeed be advocating for a position of “absolute certainty” Dr. Edward F. Hills certainly was not. Hills’ statements regarding “maximum certainty” ring true in light of the historical and textual facts. In the next Lesson we will begin looking at false assumptions regarding the transmission of the text.

Works Cited

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