

Concordia Theological Monthly



A P R I L

•

1 9 5 2

BRIEF STUDIES

SOME NOTES ON NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

It may be that one or the other of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY readers has perused an essay in *Look* of February 19, 1952, written by Mr. Hartzell Spence, author of *One Foot in Heaven* and of a long article on the sainted Dr. Walter A. Maier which was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1948. The *Look* essay has the title "The Truth about the Bible." Essentially it is a report on the vast textual enterprise whose executive secretary is Dr. Merrill M. Parvis of the University of Chicago and which desires to give to the world a complete list of all the variant readings of the New Testament text which are known to exist.

Mr. Spence, I fear, does not understand the nature of this undertaking. The intention is not, as he seems to believe, to produce an edition of the New Testament comparable to, but more correct than, that of Westcott and Hort or the convenient Nestle text editions, of which we all gratefully avail ourselves. What is planned is rather a reprint of the old *Textus Receptus*, with, however, a complete critical apparatus which will contain all the deviations from this text found in the various mss. It will then be the task of the student himself to construct, from the material submitted, the text which he believes to have been the original. The value of the edition will not lie in the text, but in the critical apparatus. Furthermore, the work will not be intended for devotional or classroom reading, but for purposes of research.

In 1872 Tischendorf published a text of the New Testament with a comprehensive collection of variant readings which was called *Editio Octava Major*. It was a stupendous undertaking and as complete as it could be in his day. Around 1900 the conviction became general that Tischendorf's comprehensive edition was no longer adequate. A number of new discoveries had been made to which naturally his apparatus did not refer. Professor von Soden of Berlin, with the financial support of a wealthy woman, Miss Koenig, undertook production of a new up-to-date edition which would contain all known variant readings. His work appeared in 1913. Unfortunately his great effort was marred by the introduction of a new terminology, by inaccuracies in the collation of mss., and by adherence to certain critical principles which now are quite universally considered untenable. (On these matters see Nestle-

v. Dobschuetz, 1925, p. 75.) Hence the von Soden edition has not attained the success which its predecessor, that of Tischendorf, enjoyed, and not long after it had appeared, the verdict was regretfully uttered by competent scholars that the whole work involved would have to be "done once more."

From the few facts reported in the above sentences it is apparent that in the field of textual criticism of the New Testament we are not dealing with a static project, but with something that is constantly changing, growing, developing. When in 1633 the Elzevir Brothers of Leyden, Holland, said "*Nunc habes textum ab omnibus receptum* (whence the term *textus receptus*), they believed that now finality had been reached. How amazed they would be if they came back to this life and saw all the manuscripts that have been discovered since their day! Our archaeologists and explorers in Bible lands are constantly at work digging and unearthing materials that either are copies of Biblical texts or have some bearing on such texts: new methods of evaluating mss. are submitted, more apt ways of classifying codices are arrived at, and the science marches forward.

Even if von Soden's enormous undertaking had been more successful than it actually was, a new effort in the field of New Testament textual criticism such as that headed by Dr. Parvis would now be in place. Almost forty years have elapsed since his work appeared, and a number of new finds have been made. Perhaps chief among these is the Chester Beatty Papyrus called P 46, containing the Epistles of Paul, dating back to the early third century, which means that it is at least one hundred years older than our most highly esteemed ms., Codex B (*Vaticanus*). At a meeting last December, Professor Hatch of Harvard announced that he had deciphered a papyrus fragment coming from about 200 A. D. and containing the text of parts of Romans 4 and 5, including 5:1, which throws light on the much-debated question whether in that passage the indicative or the subjunctive is the right reading; Professor Hatch stated that his study of that old ms. showed that the indicative was used there. It is this constant coming to light of new material that prevents the science of New Testament textual criticism from ever becoming a finished, closed endeavor. It is very misleading that Mr. Spence, speaking of the great undertaking in question, says that its aim is to "produce a version that is 'probably' right." In the first place, it is not a version (that is, a translation) that Mr. Parvis and his associates try to produce. Next, we always did have a text that was essentially right. What is aimed at is the collection of materials that will help scholars to eliminate such errors as might still exist.

When the article in *Look* draws attention to textual problems having to do with the *comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7), the pericope of the adulteress (John 7:53—8:11), the long ending of Mark's Gospel, the long benediction at the end of Romans, and the doxology of the Lord's Prayer, nothing new is presented. Those are passages which have engaged the attention of textual critics for a long time, in some instances for many centuries. Eusebius (d. 340), for instance, was confronted with the problem whether Mark 16:9-20 was really a part of Mark's Gospel; certain old mss. in the library at Caesarea did not contain this section. He studied the matter, as he tells us, and he reached the conclusion that these verses were not genuine. It was in my opinion a mistaken judgment; but everybody sees that the problem which here confronts us is not a new one, not something that it has taken our enlightened and sophisticated generation to bring to the fore.

If the question arises whether in the light of such developments in the science of textual criticism we can ever be sure that we have the text of the Apostles and Evangelists, the answer fortunately can be vigorously affirmative. The wealth of mss. at our disposal makes it possible for us to study the question as to the genuineness of a given text in detail and to arrive at conclusions which at least for ourselves are fully satisfactory. To illustrate what I mean, the text of Mark 16:9-20 has been declared by many critics to lack genuineness. There are certain facts which cannot be denied, such as the absence of these verses in codices Aleph (*Sinaiticus*) and B (*Vaticanus*), both extremely important mss. Other damaging facts can be mentioned. But we have a vast amount of material testifying to the genuineness of this section. Everybody who is interested and equipped for work of this nature can for himself study the evidence. I, for myself, as I mentioned above, have reached the conclusion that these verses come from Mark's hand. It may be impossible for me to convince everybody else that my position is right, but as far as I am concerned, I do not doubt the genuineness of the section.

It must be said, too, that the wealth of variant readings does not affect the message of the New Testament adversely. Even if the five passages mentioned in the previous paragraph should be found not to be genuine, what of it? Their elimination would not alter a single teaching of the New Testament or render its message insecure.

Incidentally, apart from other inaccuracies, it is regrettable that Mr. Spence quotes modern students as saying there are probably 50,000 errors in the two editions of the New Testament commonly read by Protestants and Catholics. Is he referring to the Authorized Version

and the Douay (Rheims) Version? In that case he is speaking of translations, of course, and to say that there are 50,000 translation errors in the New Testament section of these works, produced by competent scholars, is simply absurd. Quite probably he has in mind variant readings. The statement is often made that there are from 50,000 to 150,000 variant readings in the mss. of the New Testament. But these variant readings do not belong to one ms., but to all the New Testament mss., numbering close to 5,000. It would be totally wrong to say, for instance, that the mss. from which the Authorized Version was translated contained 50,000 variant readings. In speaking of variants, that is, different or differing readings, one naturally must have a frame of reference with which a certain ms. can be compared. If we take as our frame of reference the *Textus Receptus* as printed by Erasmus in 1516, then we shall find in the several thousand mss. at our disposal 50,000 and more deviations from the Erasmus edition. Many of these will be nothing but a change in conjunctions, a *de* instead of a *kai*, without an alteration of the sense. But is the text of Erasmus in error in all these instances? By no means. It is simply too bad that Mr. Spence in this connection speaks of 50,000 errors.

Finally, I ought to state here that the enormous textual undertaking headed by Professor Parvis is not confined to a closed circle of experts, but that everybody who has time, leisure, and training for such work is invited to participate. Thousands of mss. have to be compared and their readings listed. Those who would like to share in the labor ought to have a microfilm reader in their vicinity, because a great amount of the work to be done will consist in the reading and comparing of mss. that have been microfilmed in the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai and in the library of the Convent of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem and in other places, or that will be microfilmed on Mount Athos and probably in other localities. It is an undertaking which every Bible-loving Christian can joyfully support. All the labors that have been spent in this area have helped to confirm the old inspired dictum found on the trade-mark of Concordia Publishing House: *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum.*

W. F. ARNDT