

GLEANINGS — January 25, A.D. 2015  
Textual Criticism, Part Two

We began to address this subject standing by faith alone upon the solid rock of God's word alone, making no apology for that, and showing that the Bible proclaims its divine origin, purity, infallibility, and incorruptibility. God Himself persuades by it. Never wavering from that foundation, let's apply Biblical precepts to the history of the TRANSMISSION of the Bible.

That term refers to the fact that after the books of the Bible were written through men inspired by the Holy Spirit, their original documents were copied by hand, as were copies of the copies, and so on through the centuries (*until the printing press came along*). It cannot be denied that copying errors occurred, and hence we have what are called VARIANTS. Here is a hypothetical example:

- A. Some ancient handwritten copies (manuscripts) read "HE healed the blind man."
- B. Other ancient manuscripts (abbreviation MSS) read "JESUS healed the blind man."

Unperturbed, at once we appeal to our Biblical precepts that Scripture cannot be broken, and that God will preserve His infallible word. On one hand, we don't deny that the AUTOGRAPH (original writing) from which all copies "descend" had only one reading. On the other hand, neither do we despair and say, "the original might have been ANYTHING!" No! Because God preserves His word, we know that the original was either A or B! Any alleged option C, that has no ancient MSS attesting to it, is merely speculation, usually arising from a skeptical source.

So the Bible believing textual scholar labors in comparing the literally thousands of MSS that exist (*for the New Testament books\**) seeking to determine which of two or more variant readings found in various ancient MSS for the same passage is faithful to the original. In most cases, practical certainty is attainable. NO case presents a substantial uncertainty. In our hypothetical example, the CONTEXT of the passage would make it clear who healed the blind man. We don't have a Bible that leaves us in the dark as to whether the writer was referring to Jesus or Judas in any passage!

The faithful course of action for a modern publisher of paper or electronic Bibles is to indicate places in the text of Scripture where a variant exists. That is exactly what we find in most sound English translations. The faithless course is to usurp the authority of God's word, and based on doctrinal or other biases, presume to declare one variant reading to be the certain one.

The ANTIQUITY of a MSS (its age) is rightfully a weighty consideration for the believing textual scholar. However, another precept of faith kicks in, that of TEXTUS RECEPTUS – that is, "received text." In other words, what has the sovereign God of providence caused to be transmitted down through the centuries and used by His people? If a manuscript is very old, does that always and necessarily mean it is better than younger manuscripts?

Lord willing, that question will be explored in our next "Gleaning."

*\* This discussion of the subject of textual criticism primarily concerns this valid scholarly discipline's handling of the New Testament MSS, but the Bible's own precepts about itself apply to the textual transmission of both testaments.*