

Errors in the Greek Text behind Modern Translations? The cases of Matthew 1:7, 10 and Luke 23:45

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Attacks on the Critical Text of the Greek New Testament

In the last 120 years the attacks on the critical text of the Greek New Testament—and corresponding defense of the *Textus Receptus* (or, more broadly, the Byzantine text) have taken various forms. Burgon argued that the manuscripts that Westcott and Hort favored were vile, polluted, degenerate, heretical. Hoskier saw them as heavily influenced by Latin (this was before the great papyri discoveries). Several others have extrapolated an inference from the “doctrine” of preservation: since the majority of Greek manuscripts¹ are of the Byzantine texttype, the Byzantine is the text form used by the Church and blessed by God; and since preservation must have the corollary of accessibility in order for it to have any value, the most accessible text must be the preserved text; therefore, this is the form of the text is the most abundant it *is* the preserved text. (Of course, such a stance has no basis in history [for the Byzantine text was not in the majority until the ninth century], scripture [for the passages deduced to prove the preservation of the text mean something altogether different], or God’s *modus operandi* [for God often, if not usually, works through the remnant, rather than the majority]). More recently, some have argued that the progenitors of the modern critical text, Westcott and Hort, were incipient ‘New Agers’ and that they have somehow managed to dupe virtually all seminary students and professors who unwittingly adopt their text. (On this score, what is almost never mentioned is the advances in the last 120 years in manuscript discoveries, research methods, or solid evangelical scholars whose academic credentials are unquestionable.)

On a more popular level, the argument is purely *ad hominem*. On a fairly regular basis, I receive letters, emails, and even video tapes in which I am vilified for not considering the King James Bible as the *only* Word of God. The arguments are almost never substantive, but simply emotive, experiential, and condemnatory. Anyone who writes in this area is subject to such attacks. Dr. Bruce Metzger, for example, tells of a shocking letter he received:

This is from a Christian who is so cut up over what you and your so-called friends have done by rewriting the Bible. It would give me great pleasure if I had a bus or a jeep and could run you down, and then prop you up and run you down again, May you and your family be cast into the pit of hell. You bitch of all bitches, who gave you the write [*sic*] to do this? You shall die early for what you did.

The letter was then signed, “In Christian love, _____”!² Metzger appropriately filed this letter, along with numerous others, in a “crack-pot” folder.

More seriously, some evangelicals and fundamentalists are attacking the critical text of the Greek New Testament from the starting point of inerrancy. This is a twist on the preservation approach, for it is fundamentally theological in nature. The argument is that if one adopts the reading of the Alexandrian manuscripts in a few places, then he adopts readings that suggest the Bible is not inerrant. The verses that usually come to mind—made famous in an article published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* a few years ago—are Matthew 1:7, 10; and Luke 23:45. The purpose of this paper is to examine the thinking behind this particular approach, followed by a brief discussion of these verses.

¹ The argument is always restricted to the Greek witnesses, for as soon as one counts the Latin manuscripts, a different texttype emerges as the majority.

² Cited in Bruce M. Metzger, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997) 121. The appended “In Christian love” is not mentioned in the book but was told to me by Dr. Metzger in a conversation in 1992.

Inerrancy as a Starting Point?

First of all, one has to wonder about the method employed when a person starts with the twin presumption of inerrancy and that he can selectively locate 'errors' in the text. The point here is this: Usually those who embrace inerrancy (as do I) have to wrestle with the texts and, at times, recognize that their answers may not be adequate. Even so, they are convinced that there are sufficient answers to the questions, but that they have not yet been found. On the other hand, there are those who see errors in the text all the time, but who do not embrace inerrancy. What certain majority text advocates are now doing is claiming to see errors in the Alexandrian and Western texts, while denying such in the Byzantine. The whole method is flawed from the get-go, for the so-called errors in one tradition are by no means qualitatively greater than those in another. It reminds me of the little aphoristic ditty, "When you go into marriage, go in with your eyes wide open; once you are married, keep them half shut." The majority text advocates certainly have their eyes wide open when the Alexandrian suitors come calling, but they also keep them quite shut when they think about the old gal back home.

Second, the easiest expedient in one's quest for integrity in the matter of inerrancy is to point to one textual tradition as flawed and to claim that another is inerrant. Of course, what these proponents are not saying in all this is that (1) there are just as significant problems in the Byzantine text in certain places as Matthew 1:7, 10 and Luke 23:45. For example, 1 Cor 14:34-35 is a text which Gordon Fee (a scholar who unswervingly embraces inerrancy) says is errant in every manuscript; he goes so far as to argue that the verses should simply be dropped! Matthew 27:9 is a quotation from Zechariah but is called a quotation from *Jeremiah* in the vast bulk of witnesses—including the Byzantines! The NET Bible footnote on this says, "The problematic citing of Jeremiah for a text which looks to come from Zechariah has prompted certain scribes to alter it. Codex 22 has Zacariou; while F 33 *et pauci* omit the prophet's name altogether." Metzger's *Textual Commentary* notes that there is absolutely no question that "Jeremiah" is the original reading. It is found in the Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine texts. Thus, if majority text advocates want to fault the Alexandrian text in Matt 1:7 and 10, etc., they must also fault the Byzantine text at Matt 27:9. Further, the Byzantine text in 1 John 2:23 makes a rather clear blunder in that the last half of the verse ("everyone who confesses the Son also has the Father") is omitted in the TR and Byzantine tradition. The reason is not due to sinister motives, but to common oversight: the last three words of the first half of the verse are identical with the last three words of the second half ("has the Father"); the original compiler of the Byzantine text skipped over an *entire* line of text (a common enough occurrence among scribes). Thus, those who wish to use inerrancy as a methodological starting point are half blind in this endeavor, for they quickly and quietly dismiss the problems in their own preferred tradition while accusing the other traditions as errant.

Third, if one wants to argue from the starting point of inerrancy and then judge all manuscripts on that basis, then he must resort to conjectural emendation (that is, to changing the text without any manuscript support). There are several places in the New Testament where the challenges to inerrancy are *substantially* greater than Matt 1:7 or Luke 23:45—yet in many of these texts the vast majority of manuscripts have the 'errant' reading. If we use *our understanding* of inerrancy as the starting point, we will *not* end up with the Byzantine text. (One is reminded here of the seventeenth century German scholars who felt that the Holy Spirit would not have inspired the writers of the New Testament to pen their works in anything but good, classical Greek; hence, these same scholars 'fixed' the text in hundreds of places in which they thought the manuscripts had erred!) Along these lines, at least one prominent majority text advocate has now abandoned the majority text view, because he thinks the Byzantine text does not affirm inerrancy. His method is now the 'inerrant' method! What is ironic here is that although the majority text theory often begins with a denial that we can use reason to determine the wording of the original, but must rely on numbers to guide us, now this scholar—precisely because he began attacking the Alexandrian text from a theological *a priori*—is using *reason* (i.e., his understanding of what constitutes an inerrant text) to argue against even the majority of witnesses! Thus, the argument has come full circle.

Fourth, one of the key assumptions in this approach to the text is that there must be something sinister about certain scribes, for otherwise why would they have produced such errant manuscripts? The argument is almost always that such scribes did not make these changes unintentionally—first, because such changes are often impossible to explain as unintentional slips, and consequently, because unless one explains them as intentional changes then the only alternative is that the other reading (i.e., the Byzantine one) is an intentional alteration of the Alexandrian-Western reading. Thus, the majority text advocates are actually arguing that the critical text has sinister roots as a *defensive* measure rather than as an offensive one. It's an important distinction: The key principle in textual criticism is that one should choose the reading that best explains the rise of the other(s). And there are only two ways to explain, for example, whether "Asa" gave rise to "Asaph" or vice versa (in Matt 1:7): If "Asa" (the king's name) was original, then the scribes who changed his name consciously introduced an error into the text and are thus not to be trusted elsewhere since they have an unorthodox agenda; or, if "Asaph" was original, then the scribes who changed it to "Asa" did so because they perceived "Asaph" to be an error.

Because of this dilemma, there are thus generally two schools of thought about the ancient scribes: either the Alexandrian and Western scribes were heterodox and corrupted the text, or the Byzantine were *too* orthodox and fixed the text whenever they *perceived* errors to be. Between these two options, I would have to adopt the second as substantially closer to the truth. That is, the Byzantine text characteristically smooths out rough readings, adds words and phrases to make the text more liturgical, clear, 'orthodox.' Unfortunately, in the process the Byzantine scribes inadvertently added a lot of dross to the gold of the Word.

But what of the other charge—that the Alexandrian and Western scribes were sinister? Three responses: First, if they were, they were singularly incompetent, missing most of their opportunities to pervert the text. Second, even great scholars whom majority text advocates hail as their own—such as F. H. A. Scrivener—saw *no pernicious influence* on the Alexandrian manuscripts. And third, *every single manuscript of any substance changes the text to conform to orthodoxy*. Thus, the Alexandrian witnesses as well as the Western make *hundreds* of 'corrections' in the synoptic gospels which harmonize the gospels more and more with one another. Since this is the case,³ the argument from inerrancy falls to the ground.

As always, an ounce of evidence is worth a pound of presumption. Further, we must keep in mind the principle that biblical Christianity is a faith that has *historical* and *empirical* roots. When we adopt a view simply because of tradition, then we emulate a Catholic methodology; when we adopt a view as a leap of faith—without a basis in time-space history, then we emulate Bultmann's existentialism. The real irony of those who defend the *Textus Receptus* and those whose text-critical approach is the 'inerrancy method' is that though they are almost always fundamentalist Protestants, their method is radically *un-Protestant*.

A Brief Explanation of the Problem Passages

Matthew 1:7, 10 "Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah the father of Asa, ...
1:10 Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah..."
—NET Bible

The reading "Asaph" is found in the earliest and most widespread witnesses (1^{vid} B C D^{luc} E¹ E¹³ 700 pc), a variant spelling on Asa. Although Asaph was a psalmist and Asa was a king, it is rather doubtful that the evangelist mistook one for the other, since other ancient documents have variant spellings on the king's name (such as "Asab," "Asanos," and "Asaph"). The reading "Amos" in v. 10 in the Greek text is similar: It is most likely the original reading, but it is a variation of the more common spelling "Amon." Since there were no standard spelling guidelines in the ancient world, modern translations are justified in conforming the spelling of the kings' names to their spelling elsewhere. Thus, to see such as an error on Matthew's part—or on the part of certain manuscripts—is to impose modern spelling standards on ancient texts when there is demonstrable proof that these writers were more *creative* in their spelling than are we.⁴

Luke 23:45 "because the sun's light failed. The curtain of the temple was torn in two." —NET Bible

The wording "the sun's light failed" is a translation of tou' hJlivou ejklipovnto/"ejkleivponto" (*tou heliou eklipontos/ekleipontos*), a reading found in the earliest and best witnesses (among them 175 1 B C* L 0124 as well as several ancient versions). The majority of manuscripts (A C³ D K W Q Y 0117 0135 E¹ E¹³ Byz lat) have the flatter term, "the sun was darkened" (*ejskotivsqh/eskotisthe*), a reading that avoids the problem of implying an eclipse. This alternative thus looks secondary because it is a more common word and less likely to be understood as referring to a solar eclipse. That it appears in later witnesses adds confirmatory testimony to its inauthentic character.

Some students of the NT see in Luke's statement *the sun's light failed* (*eklipontos*) an obvious blunder in his otherwise meticulous historical accuracy. The reason for claiming such an error on the evangelist's part is due to an understanding of the verb as indicating a solar *eclipse* when such would be an astronomical impossibility during a full moon. There are generally two ways to resolve this difficulty: (a) adopt a different reading ("the sun was darkened") that smooths over the problem, or (b) understand the verb *eklipontos* in a general way (such as "the sun's light *failed*") rather than as a technical term, "the sun was *eclipsed*." The problem with the first solution is that it is too convenient, for the Christian scribes who, over the centuries, copied Luke's gospel would have thought the same thing. That is, they too would have sensed a problem in the wording and felt that some earlier scribe had incorrectly written down what Luke penned. The fact that the reading "was darkened" shows up in the

³ A majority text advocate, Wisselink, did his doctor's dissertation in Holland on this very topic; while he was able to demonstrate that individual Alexandrian witnesses harmonized a significant amount of the time, such a demonstration also proved that the motives of such scribes were within the realm of orthodoxy.

⁴ Indeed, John spells certain verbs in a variety of ways—even when the grammatical features are identical (e.g., ei\pon and ei\pan, or his various ways of spelling forms of ajnoivgw).

later and generally inferior witnesses does not bolster one's confidence that this is the right solution. But the second solution, if taken to its logical conclusion, proves too much for it would nullify the argument against the first solution: If the term did not refer to an eclipse, then why would scribes feel compelled to change it to a more general term? The solution to the problem is that *ekleipo* did in fact sometimes refer to an eclipse, but it did not always do so.

Note two prominent lexical sources on this: BAGD 242 s.v. *ejkleivpw* (*ekleipo*) notes that the verb is used in hellenistic Greek "Of the sun *grow dark*, perh. *be eclipsed*." In J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, reprint ed. w. scripture index added (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997), it is argued that "it seems more than doubtful that in Lk23⁴⁵ any reference is intended to an *eclipse*. To find such a reference is to involve the Evangelist in a needless blunder, as an *eclipse* is impossible at full moon, and to run counter to his general usage of the verb = 'fail'..." (p. 195). They enlist Luke 16:9; 22:32; and Heb 1:12 for the general meaning "fail," and further cite several contemporaneous examples from papyri of this meaning (195-96).

Thus, the very fact that the verb *can* refer to an eclipse would be a sufficient basis for later scribes altering the text out of pious motives; conversely, the very fact that the verb *does not always* refer to an eclipse and, in fact, does not normally do so, is enough of a basis to exonerate Luke of wholly uncharacteristic sloth.

Conclusion

As committed as I am to the inerrant Word, I find it rather dangerous to make one's theological convictions about the text the *starting* point of inquiry. Inerrancy is a belief that should *grow out of* an inductive study of the phenomena as well as from statements of scripture, rather than dictate what should constitute the phenomena. As a famous textual critic said nearly 80 years ago, "We treat the Bible like any other book to show that it is not like any other book."