THE THEOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF TEXTUAL VARIATION IN CURRENT CRITICISM OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT*

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IN these days of "Vatican II" an English version of the NT has been produced which is officially acceptable to both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians. Originally translated by American Protestant scholars as the Revised Standard Version, it was subsequently revised by Catholic scholars as the Catholic edition and designated as the RSV CE. For three and a half centuries the King James and the Douai-Challoner versions have stood side by side, representative of the major divisions of Western Christendom and conveying the implication that the two English texts express distinctive and important theological characteristics for Protestant and Catholic interpretation.

On numerous occasions when new translations into English have been made, someone has risen to allege that a translation is of too conservative a theological interpretation, or reflects a liberal bias, or even that it reveals a communist flair, and indeed all three qualities may be alleged of the very same translation. Recently, the announcement of a "Bible for Evangelicals" credited the RSV with clarity but criticized it for its Christology, and intimated that the newly announced translation would express the true theology. When the RSV appeared various readers alleged that its text was atheistic, or modernistic, or socialistic, or even blasphemous. We are not here concerned with the justice or injustice of such allegations, for effective refutation has long since been offered. We are concerned rather to recognize that in such instances as these there is attested the belief that variation in a text, whether in the Greek original or in translation, involves a difference in interpretation which is important to the church and to the believer. In the light of such a principle, textual criticism would be allied with exegesis and theology and even with the practical tasks in pastoral care.

Quite apart from the integrity and the skill of the editor of a Greek text or the translator of a version, a difference in the form of expression will often create a difference in the sense and may reflect a difference in the thought of the editor or the translator. Furthermore, when textual variation occurs in the Greek NT, we often do find an alteration of

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meaning. It is important to know what the original text and the original meaning were, but it is also important to recognize the subsequent revision of text and thought in the course of the church’s history. In the current edition of the Nestle NT, for example, we have more than a single text, for in the apparatus criticus we are confronted with thousands of textual variants that involve a difference of form and interpretation. Today, three special factors may increase our concern with, and the importance of, textual difference and its theological import. I refer to the publication of the RSV CE, the recent discovery of third-century papyrus texts in the Beatty and Bodmer libraries, and the unprecedented scope of the International Greek New Testament Project in the preparation of a new apparatus criticus. These three developments cast special light upon the relationship of text to interpretation. It is not our primary concern at this time to determine what is original and what is secondary, but rather to demonstrate the variety of reading and of consequent meaning. It has been remarked that “there are no ‘spurious readings’ in New Testament manuscripts.” The intent of such a statement is only to insist that every variation is genuine in its time and place. Although a variant which is a departure from the original text may be described as spurious, yet every intentional and sensible variant has a claim to authenticity in the history of Christian thought. It will be valuable to form a judgment, in the light of all modern textual discoveries and researches, of the extent to which the Greek text of our NT has been subjected to revision and made to carry differences of thought.

About 250 years ago, John Mill, of Oxford, published an edition of the Greek NT. The text itself was a repetition of the traditional Byzantine “Received Text,” but it was further reported that his manuscript sources revealed 30,000 variants. This disclosure was shocking to some, and a long and bitter debate ensued. It is most significant, however, that this eighteenth-century debate was not a theological discussion about the variant readings and their meaning; but rather it dealt with a prior issue, whether or not sacred Scripture is a proper subject for critical textual emendation as employed in secular classics.

A hundred years ago Scrivener estimated that the text of the Greek NT showed variance “at least fourfold that quantity,” i. e., 120,000. It was in 1886 that Benjamin Warfield estimated between 180,000 and

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4 F. H. A. Scrivener, A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament, 1, p. 3.