

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE GREEK TEXT

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I want to know that the Bible in my hands, and in the hands of those to whom I give it, is God's Word. That it is untampered with; no additions; no subtractions. That it is complete and therefore honoured by Him who has caused it to be written in Psalm 138.2, 'thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name'. If this is desirable of a translation which I am to use, and the church to use, must we not think that in earlier times the Greek-speaking Christians whose native language the New Testament was also wanted to know that the Bible in their hands was God's Word? Can we not say more, that they would have striven for such certainty? How can the Lord be said to have magnified His Word to us above all His name if we do not possess it in a way which we His subjects can similarly revere?

There is no need for me to labour the necessity of a firm foundation. A wise man builds his house upon a rock (Matthew 7.24). The text is the foundation of any rendering of the Holy Scriptures. If the text is faulty, the translation will of necessity be faulty. We are taught in Romans 10.17 that 'faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'. If the Word of God in our hands be faulty, that is to say if our copy of the inscripturated Word be faulty, our faith will also imbibe something of that deviation from the truth. There is much involved, and much of which to be afraid, in the outcome of those who are consistently over many years exposed to, even wedded to, inferior copies of the Scripture. At all events, credibility turns upon an authentic text and the Bible, to be of service to mankind, must be credible.

Is there such a thing as an authentic text? Modern scholars think not. It is of the essence of those who belong to the eclectic school that by comparing all the manuscripts and taking a word from one here and a word from another there we will one day arrive at the original text. That is to say that a large number of modern scholars is working on the assumption that we do not yet have the authentic text of Holy Scripture.

Now that is a rationalistic approach. Conjectural emendation, I found, was a *sine qua non* of the texts of Greek and Latin classics. It is granted that there were less surviving copies in most instances of these than of the sacred texts, making the whole procedure more fraught. But, of course, the issues at stake did not there involve the holy and inspired Scriptures of truth. One might call it scholarly best guessing, a pastime for those whose classical education gave a certain enjoyment to composing Greek and Latin verse and prose and enjoying other ways of manipulating languages and for whom nothing life-giving was at stake.

So if we say that a large number of modern scholars is working on the assumption that we do not yet have the authentic text of Holy Scripture we are pointing up that those scholars who

truly claim to be born-again believers are in this matter reverting to humanistic principles as a prime guide in their translation philosophy. If a thing is true, of course, it is true in the secular as well as the spiritual; but the secular is not foundationally true when it denies the principle of faith, which, in this matter, is faith that the Lord has promised the continuing availability of the pure word of God till the end of time. Of which more later.

It is when viewed in this light an extraordinary thing and you will immediately see what a vital matter it is. The core document of Christianity, according to them, has not yet achieved authentic text status and therefore, of course, it follows that what we have so far has no authenticity and no credibility; and no ultimate credibility should it one day be finalised to those scholars' satisfaction.

Now it is true that neither in the case of the Old Testament nor the New do we have the original manuscripts. But we must not confuse the issue. A perfect copy gives all the required information and if we (were to) have a perfect copy we need not fear because we do not have the original. In certain instances at law it might be objected that not to have or be able to show the original document raises issues of proof. So it does; in litigation a claim might or might not be genuine. In the matter in hand what purports to be a copy might display a high proportion of fabrication. But in this matter, also, we have the word of God promising the continuing availability of His pure Word until the end of time and the issue is now rather a matter of faith than providing original certifiable documentation.

If we are using terminology which requires that to be authentic a document must prove its original, that proof (as in the popular expression 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating') concerning the authenticity of the Scriptures in circulation (and the texts on which they are based) lies in the historic accuracy and fidelity on account of which the Holy Ghost blesses to the mind and heart His own inspired words.

May I, not altogether whimsically, refer you to 2 Kings 18.3–4. We are told there that Hezekiah did that which was right in the sight of the Lord. There were a number of things mentioned which constituted that right doing; among which was that 'he brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan' (a piece of brass). Here was an original. It was denigrated and destroyed because it was a temptation to idolatry; it was not preserved out of antiquarian interest or to verify the Word of God in Numbers 21.8–9. In other words, here we have a scriptural precedent that if an 'original' becomes in and of itself a temptation (particularly to idolatry) it must be removed. Is it just possible that had the originals of the books of scripture been preserved to us (some were preserved in ark and Temple for a considerable period) they would have been revered too highly in and of themselves to the point of such veneration as would border on worship?

When I speak of reposing faith in the fact of the transmission of the true text I do not mean that there may be no discernible copying faults or misprints. I use an Oxford Bible, and it uniformly has a particular grammatical fault. Other editions do not have it, but Oxford say it is too costly, in an edition which after many years is being phased out, to remove throughout. What it has is your's for yours; our's for ours. The meaning is not affected; other editions do not have these errors so there is no difficulty in ascertaining the true reading or the true orthography.

We are taught in 2 Timothy 3.7 not to be like those in doctrine or behaviour who are ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. So it is, I fear, with those who espouse the eclectic approach. Success in the search will elude them should their parameters be misconceived, as I believe they are. Are we to believe that Christians have never, never had a true text since the disappearance, the loss of the original texts?

Consider Matthew 5.18 and Luke 16.17. The former reads, 'For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled'; the latter, 'it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail'.

It has been denied that this has to do with the transmission of the text. The context is that the Lord Jesus Christ is declaring that He is keeping the law perfectly by His actions, indeed fulfilling it perfectly, and He asserts that till heaven and earth pass, i.e. as long as the world lasts, the law will be perfectly fulfilled by His disciples, in Christ as their Representative. I would argue that only an uncorrupted text of the law can preserve our understanding of what that fulfilment is.

In using the jot and tittle as His illustration our Lord is alluding to orthography, the actual writing. Now, a tittle may be likened to the cross of a 't' and a jot to the dot of the letter 'i'. Hebrew orthography is not the same as ours and the Greek iota does not have a dot but the explanation is true in principle. Down to the smallest detail there will be no deviation from the established word. By inference the Lord is referring to the actual writing, the transcription of the text, which, of course, carries all with it. If there is no error in transmission then there is no error of documentary proof concerning the doctrine. This transmission of accurate texts, thus enabling each successive generation to have the inscripturated word in full, shall never fail.

Add to these the consideration of John 10.34–36. 'Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?' There the Lord affirms the impossibility of invalidating any scriptural truth for the sake of maintaining a tradition or contrary view. Without the correct transmission of the text, the possession of a standard text,

such argument would not be possible. It is noteworthy that the Saviour is satisfied with the Hebrew of His day and those parts of the Septuagint which He and the New Testament writers used.

Then there is Isaiah 59.20–21. ‘And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD. As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD, for henceforth and for ever.’ It is difficult to see what these words mean if they do not ultimately refer to the transmission of the text, though this may not seem to be the immediate context. Though ‘mouth’ be emphasised, we do not need to suppose oral transmission is the sole focus here; we may include written transmission also, which, of course, we have in the very preservation of Isaiah 59 itself. On the strength of Romans 15.4 (‘For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning’) we are surely to argue from the particular to the general here. Namely that the Spirit is at work in the transmission of the entirety of the utterances of God no less than in the opening of them up to the hearts and minds of believers. And, of course (as has often been observed) what is the point of an inspired original if we do not have true copies?

Now, earlier, I asked the none-too-rhetorical question, Are we to believe that Christians have never, never had a true text since the loss of the originals? Are we to modify that somewhat and say that Christians had an inferior text until the dawn of critical text scholars? Or that the very first Christian readership had such a true text but no one has ever had it since? If we understand that the Lord promises in Matthew 5.18 and Luke 16.17, at least by inference, that the transmission of the text will never fail it follows that the supposition that there was a period, whether brief or even continuing to the present time, in which the text was everywhere obscured, not to say lost, is false.

I suppose that you and I in considering Revelation 22.18–19 think particularly of making a translation. ‘For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.’ Certainly, the Trinitarian Bible Society uses as its translational principle ‘as literal as possible, as free as necessary’.¹ But though John as the inspired penman speaks prophetically and thereby embraces translation procedures, he may also, more likely even, have had in mind the copyists of his own time; having perhaps observed their carelessnesses (to say no more) in copying other parts of the sacred scriptures. And, of course, we may argue from the particular to the general here too—we have no need to restrict these words to the book of Revelation only, as the much earlier Deuteronomy 4.2 witnesses, ‘Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.’

For your additional consideration I would like also to introduce what I term the transmissional principle of Scripture. One may say it is beloved of the Lord. In Exodus 12.24, 26, 27 ‘ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever ... and it shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s passover’, And so in Exodus 13.8, 14.

The same principle is observable as part of the educational method ‘precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little’ (Isaiah 28.9–13). In John 17.20 the Lord Jesus Christ prays for it in these words, ‘neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word’; and it surfaces in 2 Timothy 1 and 2: ‘when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also’ (2 Timothy 1.5) and ‘the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also’ (2 Timothy 2.2).

The Lord, we may say, loves the act of transmitting sacred knowledge, and, therefore, the preservation of it as it makes the transition from one generation to another is His delight.

It is a Jewish maxim that, ‘The transmission of the Bible is as old as the Bible itself according to the ancient tradition ... that Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua and Joshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly’ (Avot 1.1). This concept of ‘torah’ which is handed down from generation to generation includes all of the Bible as it developed, with all the parts which accompanied it and were added to it and which also shared in its holiness.²

Somewhat scathingly, opponents of the view that we have an authentic text, i.e. that ‘my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever’ (Isaiah 59.21)—somewhat scathingly they speak of the necessity of a perpetual miracle that the Word should be thus preserved and we recoil a little from such loaded words. Well, it is and it isn’t a perpetual miracle. It is no more or less so than the fulfilment of Psalm 121, for example, in verses 3, 7 & 8, ‘he that keepeth thee will not slumber ... The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore’. Without a corresponding preservation of the text there is only a theoretical value in an inspired, inerrant original. If there is a miracle then it is none other than the daily superintending watchfulness, working all things together for good as the Lord by His sovereign power constantly displays. As the Lord does in our daily lives, so He does with the texts using, among other things, the copyists’ care and the printers’ skills.

Tregelles has written that,

It must be admitted as a fact, that Holy Scripture has been subject to the same casualties in copying as other books and that the same consequence has resulted: for as copyists are not infallible, they have made mistakes in transcribing Holy Scripture, just as they might when engaged in copying any secular writings. Of course God might, if it had been in accordance with His wise purposes, have made copyists infallible, and thus have preserved Holy Scripture from the usual accidents of transcription: but, He has no more seen fit to do this, than He has either to prevent compositors from making mistakes when engaged in setting the types of a sheet of scripture, or to hinder translators of the Word of God from ever missing the meaning of the text before them.³

Care was the hallmark of Old Testament copying. ‘And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee’ (Exodus 25.16). ‘And he took and put the testimony into the ark’ (Exodus 40.20). It was an early interpretation of the Jews to interpret the ‘song’ of Deuteronomy as the whole Torah: ‘now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the children of Israel’ (Deuteronomy 31.19). Without accuracy of copying, of transmission, this witness could not be accomplished. ‘And it came to pass when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites ... saying, Take this book of the law and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee’ (Deuteronomy 31.24–26).

It was there as a standard whether for reference or for copying. Samuel, we read, in his turn did likewise. ‘Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the LORD’ (1 Samuel 10.25). In Nehemiah 8.1 we read, ‘All the people gathered themselves together ... and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel’. A scribe implies the ministry of copying, as well as public reading and teaching. Usage and the familiarity engendered was all part of this transmissional care.

Through many centuries care was the guideline; the copying was famously precise as to the letters, and their positions in the line and column; right down to the days of pointing. With care went awe. It was felt to be an awesome thing that men were handling the very Word of God. So old, worn manuscripts and faulty ones were laid up and left to decay by natural means but never submitted to the wanton destruction of men.

The New Testament was not so leisurely.

Let us suppose that the Gospel according to Luke has been written and is being sent to its first recipient, Theophilus.

Now, I am a pastor and you will understand the difference between being a full-time scholar and one who has an interest in these matters. So I wonder if you will permit me to proceed by illustrating simplistically (and leave the detail to be filled in by others more scholarly than I) the stages which are likely to be met with in transmission. To some extent a distinction has to be made between the Jewish mode of copying and the Christian, but there is no diminution of the Lord's providential care nonetheless. In this respect, that while Jewish circumstances were unhurried, many of the early Christian copies were made under threat of persecution and therefore made hurriedly, with one eye perhaps on a quick getaway.

Let us suppose, I say, that the Gospel according to Luke is being sent to its first recipient, Theophilus. Firstly, let me illustrate by saying that this lecture has been through many stages of composition and personal editing. I have not issued an earlier edition. I do not suppose that this lecture will be printed and in preparation for printing, edited. But you will readily see that the published edition might not be the same, and indeed might be an improvement upon, my original.

Not so with the inspired writings. Though not necessarily completed in one sitting (indeed Old Testament prophecies are often short, dated, and later collected together) we must assume, short of evidence to the contrary, that when the Gospel according to Luke, say, appeared it was complete. Complete and without error. In the case of an epistle which an amanuensis took down by dictation we must assume, short of information to the contrary, that the amanuensis correctly wrote what was spoken under inspiration, so that there was no disparity between the Apostle's dictation under the influence of the Holy Spirit and what the amanuensis wrote. It would, certainly, have been remiss of Paul not to have read through, or have read back to him, what his amanuensis took down.

So there was, we shall assume, one original; no successive editions, each with competing claims to be the original.

Whether Theophilus be an individual (as I think) or a church, it is likely that each would have a library; or perhaps a small church might have a prominent member with one, whether modest or substantial. An original would be kept there and valued. One might assume (it would indeed be an assumption) that the instruction in Colossians 4.16 ('and when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea') meant sending a copy; or lending the original while Laodicea made a copy.

Perhaps a copy would be requested. Trained servants would be on hand. Now, before long, the arising of persecution would have a threefold effect—the originals would probably be spirited away safely; copies might be rapidly transcribed; and in the hands of an escaping believer on

whom hands might be laid a copy might be damaged, ripped, or destroyed. Libraries in times of persecution would be ransacked. Prior to this, let us assume, there were a body of folks, a congregation or two, who had heard the Gospel read to them frequently, perhaps in lectionary format, or copyists who were aware of contents who would know what the original contained and could discern error in a falsified copy. Never underestimate the value of lectionaries for standardising the very words of the Scriptures handed down. In a similar way does not the Prayer Book retain an awareness, which otherwise might have been hidden to many, of a version of the Psalms earlier than the AV?

Now, let us take up my earlier statement. Because of our Lord's teaching in Matthew 5.18 and Luke 16.17 it follows that the supposition that there was or is a period in which the true text is lost is false. Now add to that the fact that it is universally accepted that we do not have the original documents. But, then, the Lord has said that there never will be a time when a tittle, or iota even, of the text shall fail. It must follow therefore that our Lord foresaw, one may say prophesied even, that the apographa, the copies, will transmit the whole corpus, the whole body, of His infallible word. (The technical term for originals is autographa; for copies, apographa.)

But not all copies. Of the documents, as of the persons behind them, the Scripture is true, 'There must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you' (1 Corinthians 11.19). Gaius c. 175–200AD wrote:

The Divine Scriptures these heretics have audaciously corrupted, laying violent hands upon them, under pretence of correcting them. That I bring no false accusation anyone who is disposed may easily convince himself. He has but to collect the copies belonging to these persons severally and then to compare them with one another and he will discover that their discrepancy is extraordinary. Those of Asclepiades, at all events, will be found discordant from those of Theodotus. Now plenty of Scriptures of either sort are obtainable, inasmuch as these men's disciples have industriously multiplied the so-called corrected copies of their respective teachers, which are, in reality, nothing else but corrupted copies. With the foregoing copies, again, those of Hermophilus will be found entirely at variance. As for the copies of Apollonides they even contradict one another. Nay, let anyone compare the fabricated text which those persons put forth in the first instance with that which exhibits their latest perversions of the truth and he will discover that the disagreement between them is even excessive. Of the enormity of the offence of which these men have been guilty they must needs themselves be fully aware. Either they do not believe that the Divine Scriptures are the utterance of the Holy Ghost, in which case they are to be regarded as unbelievers, or else they account themselves wiser than the Holy Ghost, and what is that but to have the faith of devils? As for denying their guilt, the thing is impossible, seeing that the copies under discussion are all their own actual handiwork; and they know full well that not such as these are the Scriptures which they received at the hand of their catechetical teachers.⁴

What we gather is that in this one instance alone there were four different text types discernible which were known to be corrupted and that they were copied in great number. They differed widely from each other. Early copies of one copyist differed from his subsequent issues. The men who copied them knew they were corrupting them. Their catechetical teachers knew they had corrupted them. And this orthodox father of the second century, Gaius, knew they had corrupted them. He bears testimony to their falsity as evidence for posterity. Furthermore, Gaius could write being fully aware that there was a safe series of manuscripts which everybody knew of—as, for example, the catechetical teachers also. At that time the precious and the vile could be distinguished, so why not now?

He calls the perpetrators of these immense differences ‘heretics’. Which must mean that he regarded this to be primarily a doctrinal editing of the sacred Scriptures. These, being different from one another, were either characterised by carelessness in copying or continual editing. The expressions, ‘so-called corrected copies,’ ‘perversions of the truth,’ ‘fabricated text’ and ‘wiser than the Holy Ghost’ and the description ‘heretics’ speak of Gaius’ contempt for such productions and his conviction that doctrinal deviation from orthodoxy was at the heart of the matter. He speaks of the ease with which manuscripts may be collected. This is at the turn of the 2nd century.

Burton has a word for what Gaius describes—it is none other than mutilation.⁵ The argument, therefore, that the oldest extant manuscripts must of necessity be the most reliably accurate, being closer to the original, is demonstrably false. Others have noted, what Gaius alludes to, that the 2nd century was the most prone to manuscript falsifying of any century.

But ‘we are not as many which corrupt the word of God’ ‘nor handling the word of God deceitfully’ (2 Corinthians 2.17; 4.2).

In comparing the codices A (Alexandrinus), Aleph (Sinaiticus), B (Vaticanus), C (Parisian), and D (Codex Bezae) Burton writes (among much else), ‘it matters nothing (to the 1881 Revisionists) that B, Aleph, C, and D are discovered on careful scrutiny to differ essentially, not only from 99 out of 100 of the whole body of extant manuscripts besides, but even from one another. This last circumstance ... is unaccountably overlooked. And yet it admits of only one satisfactory explanation, namely that in different degrees they all five exhibit a fabricated text.’ (Burton thought Aleph, B, and D three of the most scandalously corrupt copies extant and that A was the best of a very bad bunch. He lists them in order of untrustworthiness as D, Aleph, B, the fragmentary codex C and he describes A as being, beyond all doubt disfigured by the fewest blemishes of any (which reads like damning with faint praise)).

Between B and Aleph, he writes, ‘there subsists an amount of sinister resemblance, which proves that they must have been derived ... from the same corrupt original ... Yet they do stand asunder in every page, as well as differ[ing] widely from the commonly received Text

with which they have been carefully collated. On being referred to this standard, in the Gospels alone, B is found to omit at least 2877 words: to add 536: to substitute 935: to transpose 2098: to modify 1132 (in all 7578): the corresponding figures for Aleph being 3455, 839, 1114, 2299, 1265 (in all 8972). And be it remembered that these are by no means the same in both.' Burgon affirms that it is easier to find two consecutive verses in which these two manuscripts differ from one another, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree.⁶

Gaius was aware of such falsifying tendencies 200 years before the earliest of 4 of these manuscripts. D, described by Burgon as the most depraved text of these, he admits likely to exhibit a 2nd-century text.⁷ If so, maybe it would be one of those which would have fallen under the just censures of Gaius or a contemporary catechetical teacher.

Now, all the translators into English since 1881 have followed the text of Westcott and Hort or the eclectic developments of which I have spoken. The translators of the New King James Version deny it; but it is equally undeniable that it is pervaded and vitiated by a subtle dependence upon that text. In my view all have put an inordinate weight on certain early manuscripts most notably B (Vaticanus) which Erasmus examined in the Vatican library where it remains and Aleph (Sinaiticus) parts of which were found by the scholar Tischendorf discarded in a monastery.

Now, cast your mind back to schooldays. Did not the textbooks which you used most become tattered and needed earlier replacing than rarely consulted books? So it is always. The whole body of constantly used manuscripts which were known to be 'safe' (I speak in the legal sense, as when a judgment on appeal is allowed to be safe or not safe, that is based on truth as far as a fallible legal system is able to determine); the constantly used safe manuscripts soon wore out and needed to be replaced. If a transcriptional error or two occurred in the new manuscript provided by a copyist it was instantly recognised. And so we may see that the usage of the church's copyists and the welcome the faithful would accord to such manuscripts (in contradistinction to the ones of which Gaius writes) ensured a continuing supply of copies known to be faithful and uncorrupted. Let me ask you, do you not think that the circulation of heretical copies caused the orthodox to highlight the manifestly correct copies the more urgently?

I anticipate a little to observe that Erasmus is scorned by his detractors for allegedly using but seven manuscripts though, of course, he was almost certainly aware of representatives of the whole range of available manuscripts. He had searched for them. Since the revision of 1881 scholars do not seem to see the absurdity in likewise putting such weight, though they themselves are aware of (but have not collated) thousands of manuscripts, or portions of them, so much weight, I say, on these few early manuscripts of which they are so fond, five perhaps. Whether Erasmus, or whether the moderns, they stand or fall by the genuineness, I mean faithfulness, of those manuscripts to which they commit their weight.

Erasmus may or may not have been a Christian. The Lord, you recall, may use a Cyrus. Erasmus was gifted in many languages. He was aware that there were false manuscripts and true ones, and also wherein the falsity of the false lay. Scholars by implication do him an injustice in speaking of his ignorance of subsequently discovered manuscripts. Of course he was ignorant of subsequently discovered manuscripts! The moderns are also not aware of the content of every discovered manuscript. But in all probability representatives of all the texts subsequently discovered, whether corrupted or true, were known to Erasmus.

He was aware also that in addition to the transmission of Greek manuscripts by copying, translations, known to be faithfully accurate, had been made into other languages such as Syriac and, most importantly, Latin. There came a time when Jerome produced a Latin translation which became the basis of the Vulgate and was known to have been assimilated to Roman Catholic beliefs, but prior to that there had been faithful Latin translations, which, to save confusion, I shall call (as others do) the Italic.

While the Lord, by His sure hand of preservation to fulfil His word, committed to the Greeks who knew their own language the major responsibility of maintaining a pure text, the faithful Italic texts flourished among what have become called the dissident groups (because of their opposition to Roman Catholicism), among whom we may number, as best known to ourselves, the Waldensians. These texts were still going strong in Erasmus' time. They escaped the earlier deprivations of those who for their own purposes corrupted the Greek copies which came into their hands. Therefore in some instances they preserve an original faithful reading that has almost totally disappeared (for whatever reason) from the Greek texts which remain. Where in rare instances, say Acts 8.33; 9.5–6; 15.34; 1 John 5.7–8; Revelation 16, the Italic preserved that which the Greek mislaid, he unerringly lighted upon them by the good hand of the Lord and restored them to their place under the overseeing providence of Almighty God.

It is my opinion that he does not deserve opprobrium for this, that we may rightly trust his judgment and that the AV is not compromised thereby. A scholar of his rank would have no difficulty restoring from Latin into Greek. We may say, for example, that careful and tasteful restoration processes of fabric do not destroy the genuineness of a fractured original; rather, it is precisely what the aim is—to preserve. Now with language you CAN have what you had, in a way you cannot have with fabric, but in and of itself there is nothing amiss in the process of restoration. I would go so far as to say that in the matter of conjectural emendation it is Erasmus' work here that proves the rule but only because of the overrule of our providential God and Saviour.

Scrivener writes, 'the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within 100 years after it was composed: that Irenaeus (150AD) and the African fathers, and the whole Western, with a portion of the Syrian, Church used far inferior

manuscripts to those employed by Stunica' (of Complutensian fame) 'or Erasmus, or Stephens thirteen centuries later, when moulding the Textus Receptus'.⁸

Now let us simplistically (as I have asked) consider how honest copies come to be made, where there is no attempt to falsify, but blunders (as Tregelles noted) are nevertheless perpetrated. Some may be written in capitals (UNCIALS), some cursives. Some on papyrus, some on vellum. Some are scrolls, some parchments. Some are palimpsests, i.e. written over something which was used to record something else which has faded—to save expense.

Let us suppose (I am being simplistic as to numbers and cross referencing, but not in the sheer matter of the copying) that 5 copies are made. Each differs from the original by one mistake. Copy A omits a word in line 3 but is otherwise faultless. (Maybe a correction would be put in, as old as the original). Copy B repeats the last word of line 4 making it also the last word of line 5. (In some instances this might even make sense and therefore not be so readily spotted.) Copy C omits the tenth line. Copy D is accurate, but prone to use abbreviations under pressure of expense of materials in a poor community and always puts two letters instead of 4 for God, making it almost indistinguishable from the word for 'who'—just a mark which could easily fade. Copy E repeats a word in line 15. You will see that by comparing the copies the original can still be readily known and traced. And the copies can be taken back to the original for checking at this stage.

The brother with Copy C takes his copy away with him and assiduously arranges for copies to be made in the area to which he goes. No other copy is known in the area but it is clear that the eleventh line does not make sense (the tenth being omitted) and maybe an attempt is made to adjust. (If the church is wise, the pastor will merely point out the difficulty in his teaching and leave the copy unmolested.) Likewise with copy E which is taken to another place and copied by servants who, while literate did not know the Greek as a first language and made 30 copies with other minor mistakes but always retaining the repetition of the word in line 15. Likewise copy D, but here the servant copyist cannot easily read the writing and is more than a little confused by the abbreviations and does what he can with them, not always copying identically the same abbreviation. Another copyist, removed from Greek culture perhaps, copies and decorates, merely, not understanding what he writes or even the script.

It is here that the true usage of the term 'family' of manuscripts can be seen. If you had them all in front of you at this stage you could see two things. That there is a family descending from Copy C, and some other lesser branches. But they are all branches of the same family and from collating (an easy matter at this stage) the whole original could be demonstrably produced even if the ancestor had vanished.

Now suppose a translation. Irrespective of how good the actual translation is, it would not be difficult to see which Greek manuscript it has been translated from. But if its Greek original is

lost, because the translation survives it would not be difficult for an experienced Greek and Latin linguist to determine what lay behind the translation and understand what its original was.

Bruce Metzger is not alone among the moderns when he writes, 'If, for example, nine manuscripts agree against one, as often, and the nine have a common original, the numerical preponderance counts for nothing'.⁹ I ask, 'Counts for nothing in what respect?' Leaving aside that they may not in fact have a common original, what is being said here? Numerical preponderance could, and should indeed, represent the pure fountain. Without a numerical preponderance how can a universal and correct transmission occur? We see, then, that it is only within the backwaters of seeking to construct a hybrid text from diverse manuscripts which have never agreed with one another that this sort of calculation, while true within its parameters, becomes necessary.

Let me illustrate. In the event of a collision the four occupants of the uninvolved car following would, at law, probably be considered to have but one perspective. Yet they may have seen the whole occurrence more accurately than two or three individuals standing by and differently positioned at the side of the road who only looked up instantly after the noise but saw nothing of the impact. If the weight of evidence was in that situation only allowed to be weighed as merely four independent accounts, you can readily see that truth might be obscured.

Now 85% of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament represent a common text. It is often known as the Byzantine text; sometimes as the majority text because it is represented by such a large proportion of the Greek manuscripts. It is probably unwise now to use this earlier term because it has been hijacked by the modern eclectic scholars who aim to produce a consensus text from the majority of readings including Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and others. Now clearly the definition 'majority' differs with its differing parameters.

(The text based predominantly on the 15%, Vaticanus and so forth, I have referred to as 'eclectic'. It, too, goes by other names, the critical text being preferred. The Textus Receptus (TR) which, translated from the Latin means the received text, applies to a family of printed editions of the New Testament in the 16th—19th centuries. It differs from the Byzantine, or what is commonly known as the received text, inasmuch as it includes the readings derived from non-Byzantine sources such as the Italic.)

I am sure you will agree with me that in the matter of good works we are to do them out of love and devotion to our dear Saviour who loved us and gave Himself for us. On the other hand good works intended to earn salvation are delusory and an abomination. Without pretending that the parallel is exact, I use this as an aide memoire to illustrate that, on the one hand, the acceptance of the legitimacy of the majority text (in the original sense of the term) is

procedurally correct while, on the other, the perpetual seeking for an authentic original which allegedly we do not have is not and is delusory by its very faithless nature.

I am in marked sympathy with Dr Debra Anderson when she writes,

... it would be the writer's recommendation that those who desire the glory of God and the edification and unity of Christians (in this matter) band together to return the text of scripture to its proper place. To do so, first a single traditional text of the Old Testament—for which the Leningrad Codex well suffices—and a traditional single text of the NT, the best of which has long been considered the Stephens 1550 or the Beza 1598, will need to be accepted as the diplomatic texts of scripture. 10 (A diplomatic text is one which is accepted as standard; it remains unaltered—variations may be listed alongside, but the text is on no account altered).

[These would be recognised] as single texts representing the majority of manuscripts which God has preserved and thereby representing the inspiration of the autographs. These should then be used for translation, ensuring that God's people round the world have Bibles which—at least textually—are consistent in whatever language. This will reduce the confusion caused by the ever-growing number of diverse Bibles which are infiltrating churches today.¹¹

I am sure that the Authorised Version of the Bible and those translations in any other language based on the Received Text are God's Word and that we may with confidence publish and distribute such, leaving it to the Lord to magnify His Word. Language and orthography are constantly changing; but only relatively rarely should any adjustment be made, else transmission by memorisation, for example, is rendered more difficult. But chiefly, as in 1881, that the god of this world will move men to go too far in the adjustments they make and thereby break faith with the fidelity of the word handed on by many witnesses and committed to faithful men to pass on to others also.

You have been very patient and I am no expert. But I hope that I have indicated enough reassurance so that none of us need feel any need to waver in our faith, which has come by hearing and our hearing by the Word of God—inasmuch as that Word which we have represented in our tongue by the Authorised Version is of the purest source, preserved for us by the governance of our Saviour who is 'head over all things to the church' (Ephesians 1.22) in this as in all affairs; in this, indeed, supremely.

Endnotes

1. An Introduction to the Society's Principles, TBS 1997, p. 4.

2. Encyclopaedia Judaica, apud Debra Anderson, A Comparison of the Critical Methodologies and Philosophies Employed in the Production of the Old Testament and New Testament Texts, p. 26.

3. Samuel P. Tregelles, quoted in Thomas H. Horne, Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament, p. 48, apud Debra Anderson, p. 3.

4. Quoted in John W. Burgon, The Revision Revised, pp. 323-324.

5. Ibid., p. 70.

6. Ibid., pp. 11–12.

7. Ibid., p. 12.

8. Anderson, Comparison of the Critical Methodologies, p. 244.

9. Apud Burgon, The Revision Revised, p. 30.

10. Anderson, p. 273.

11. Ibid., p. 273.