
NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM, VERNACULAR TRANSLATIONS AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

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(Received 11 April 2013, revised 6 May 2013)

Abstract

This article explores a few historical aspects of the New Testament textual criticism and translation in the vernacular languages as they entailed intolerant reactions from the Church and secular powers. It intends to highlight that as academic and scientific as they may be, these endeavours were not exempt from facing religious intolerance. The awareness of this reality is not an aim in itself, but it provides the academic world with the best solutions for any future replay of similar circumstances. One of the proposals hereby suggested is to approach an academic challenge with an academic response.

Keywords: New Testament, textual criticism, translation, vernacular, intolerance

1. Introduction

This paper brings together certain aspects from the history of the New Testament textual criticism and translation into the vernacular languages, academic activities whereby religious intolerance loomed at times, especially as people reacted to the different readings and the new collations of manuscripts or to the translations into the vernacular languages. The hope of this enterprise is to highlight the importance of religious intolerance awareness, as the academic circles are not exempt from hostile attitudes when it comes to religion.

2. Textual criticism

First of all what is textual criticism and how did it appear? The New Testament as a Greek collection of manuscripts is extant only through copies. All these 'second-hand' manuscripts differ to a certain extent from one another [1]. If we had the original copies of the New Testament books, often called autographs, we would face no difficulty at the existence of these variants [2].

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But since there is no surviving original, the need for textual criticism arose. When the scribes did not modify intentionally, the variants appeared were mainly caused by the handwriting with all its imperfections. Black presents two categories of errors: accidental and intentional. As a way of example, from the former category I can recall faulty word division of a *scriptio continua* and homoeoteleuton ('similar ending'), which occurs when, because of two words with similar ending, the scribe jumps after the first not to the following word, but to the second word which ends similarly and continues from there. From the latter category, I can refer to grammatical improvements and elimination of apparent discrepancies [3]. Therefore, the textual critic has a threefold task: "(1) to sift through all this material, carefully collating (comparing) each MS with all the others, in order (2) to detect the errors and changes in the text, and thus (3) to decide which variant reading at any given point is more likely to be the original" [1]. It is way beyond the scope of this article to discuss the methods of textual criticism, but I will only say that one paramount guideline in discovering the original text is that the best candidate for this status is the variant "which best accounts for the existence of the others" [4]. In other words, the variant which seems to have been modified, improved, or corrected and thus caused all, or at least the majority of the others, is probably the original.

As to the history of the New Testament text transmission, we need first to delineate its main periods, in order to better ascertain the examples of hostility which we will be meeting with henceforth. Epp and Fee [1, p. 8] talk about six periods: (1) the period of confusion (to AD 400), (2) the period of transmission (400-1516), (3) the establishment of Textus Receptus (1516-1633), (4) the period of discovery and research (1633-1831), (5) the period of constructive criticism (1831-1881), and (6) the time since Westcott and Hort (1881 to the present).

The first period is called 'of confusion' because during the first few centuries, the scribes were less meticulous as the later scribes were and thousands of changes were introduced in the text. This description of the first period of NT textual transmission as it was suggested by Epp and Fee, may sound strange for those accustomed to the meticulous hand of the Hebrew scribe. However, Royse cites Colwell, Hort, the Alands, and several others that agree on the same point, that the Greek scribe during the early period of Christianity were never as accurate as the oriental ones, and this was especially determined by the attitude towards the documents copied [5].

The second time span is the time when the Greek text was generally confined to the Eastern Church, because in the West the Latin overtook Greek in importance. The New Testament text got a standardized form in Constantinople. After Gutenberg's invention of printing, the first published Greek NT was Erasmus' 1516 work. Unfortunately, both the first and its subsequent editions were based on late medieval manuscripts, which were of inferior quality. The term Textus Receptus derives from the introduction of the Greek Testament edited by Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir (1633), which

was very much like the texts of Erasmus and those who followed him, Stephanus and Beza. The period of discovery and research was a time of tremendous efforts to collect new information from Greek manuscripts, the versions, and the Fathers. However, the text published during this time span was not other than Textus Receptus, information from the newly discovered material being wholly destined to notes in the critical apparatuses. The year 1831 marks the detachment from Textus Receptus through the Greek text published by the Karl Lachmann, a German classicist. Another even more notable achievement was the voluminous and tedious work of Constantin Von Tischendorf. The apex of the time was though reached with the monumental work of Westcott and Hort, who built on their predecessors' efforts in coming up with a Greek version of the New Testament based on the best at the time manuscripts. Lastly, since Westcott and Hort, Textus Receptus was not abandoned, but the New Testament scholarship moved in the direction of the two English textual critics.

The earliest incident of religious intolerance caused by a different textual reading that I am aware of comes from the second period. In discussing about the textual variants of 1 Timothy 3.16, Tischendorf [6] brings out the case of Macedonius II, Patriarch of Constantinople between 495-511, who is said by Liberatus (the sixth century), later confirmed by Hincmarus (the ninth century), to have been deposed and banished by the Emperor Anastasius for changing $\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ to $\theta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, or in Latin *qui* to *Deus*. That both readings were in effect is clear from the following example. Theodoret, bishop of Cyprus, in his *Dialogues* tackles with the issue of Trinity, particularly with the substantial equality of the Son with the Father, negated by some contemporaries. The work is written as a series of disputations between two imaginary actors, 'Orthodoxus' and 'Eranistes'. The former follows the apostolic creeds, which means that he stands for the ones who held on to the full and eternal divinity of Christ. The latter is the opponent who doubts, asks questions, and denies. When in the course of discussion, Eranistes states that he submits to the authority of the apostles and prophets and asks for biblical arguments, Orthodoxus quotes 1 Timothy 3.16, "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness. God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles believed on in the world, received up into glory." [7]

As Robertson [2, p. 158] intimates, Macedonius may have not been the originator of this understanding. How could the two variants appear? The relative pronoun $\text{Ο}\Sigma$ (who, which) could have been easily confused by the scribes with $\text{Θ}\Sigma$, a common abbreviation of $\text{Θ}\text{Ε}\text{Ο}\Sigma$ (God). The implications of reading a personal pronoun instead of a proper noun in 1 Timothy 3.16 are reflected in the two renderings. "He who was revealed in the flesh" is not the same with "God who was revealed in the flesh". Somehow, the Church of the time, felt that by this alternative reading, Christ is made less than God. Time vindicated Macedonius, for as Metzger argues, "The reading which, on the basis of external evidence and transcriptional probability, best explains the rise

of the others is ὄς“ [8]. Therefore, the allegation of distorting the sacred text was simply not true.

As Medieval scholasticism brought Aristotle and the Bible face to face, a whole plethora of new questions and dilemmas appeared in the West, for which the Latin text was no more enough to seek an answer from. Therefore, scholars wanted to read the original text in both Hebrew and Greek.

The second example I want to point out is one occasioned by Lorenzo Valla's criticisms. Besides proving in *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione* that the Donation of Constantine, a document which pretends that Emperor Constantine donated Rome and the Roman West to the pope, was a forgery [9], he had important contributions in the New Testament area. As a humanist he applied the criteria of reading profane literature to the sacred text. Valla (1405-1457) was in a sense the father of modern biblical criticism. In 1444 he published his *Annotations on the New Testament* in which he was comparing the Latin *Vulgata* with the Greek original that was available to him [10]. As a way of example, he, followed later by Erasmus, questioned some of Jerome's lexical choices, such as the Latin *paenitentia* ('penance') for the Greek *metanoia* ('repentance') in Mark 1.15. What Valla was insinuating was that the whole system of penance and indulgences in the Catholic Church were standing on a mistranslation.

Many such embarrassing questions caused him to be called in front of Inquisition [11]. He escaped the Inquisition though, on account of a formal conformity, after which he became the secretary of Nicholas V [12], an open-minded pope with much humanistic fervour.

A legal case from the beginning of the sixteenth century deserves attention next. It is the trial of the Italian Hebrew scholar Agazio Guidacerio (1477?-1540) and other three fellow lecturers [13]. In 1530 he was teaching Hebrew and Greek in Paris, having been appointed by Francis I as a royal lecturer. In his 1531 *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, a nonsophisticated commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.3-11), the author makes a few personal comments, among which we find remarks of his own persecution, when he exhorts on the last beatitude, "by which he meant his losses in the Sack of Rome and subsequent position, from which Francis I had rescued him" [13, p. 249]. In January 1534 Guidacerio, François Vatable and Paul Paradis who taught Hebrew, and Pierre Danès, a Greek professor, have been prosecuted by Noël Beda, the syndic of the Faculty of Theology.

There were many accusations, but most of them were formal or simply, untrue. The real allegation was that these four grammarians had no theological training and yet, they criticize the *Vulgata*. The case being brought before the Parliament of Paris, justice it has been given to Beda, forbidding the accused to criticize the text of Jerome thenceforth. Something similar happened even to cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534) [13, p. 261] whose works, in spite of the efforts of pope Clement VII, have been condemned by the Faculty of Paris in 1533, among other reasons, because he abandoned *Vulgata* in favour of new editions and translations.

Another example is that of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, called “the prince of the Renaissance” [14]. He is known for many pieces of great moralistic literature, yet his fame comes out of the 1516 New Testament in Greek, the first ever to be printed. While in the first edition he published both the Greek and the text of the NT from Vulgata, in the second edition replaces the latter with his own translation in Latin. Having showed by comparison some blatant errors in the Vulgata, he brought so much criticism against him that in the third edition, he preferred to simply reprint the Vulgata, alongside with the Greek text, his contribution being narrowed down to just notes [15]. Among his most controversial textual criticisms he discarded the three witnesses in heaven from 1 John 5.7. Taking out the Trinitarian expression from this text, he got raged criticism. After a while Erasmus reported the finding of a new Greek manuscript, the formula and allowed Erasmus to restore the reading in his third edition of 1522 [13, p. 186]. Erasmus did not suffer any physical oppression from the religious authorities of the time, but was harassed enough in his academic work to force himself to solve problems that were not really his.

Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), professor of Classical philology at Berlin, was the first scholar to publish a Greek New Testament which was not a refinement of Textus Receptus, but it came out entirely from the application of the textual critical principles [16]. The Pietists were complaining for more than a century at the different readings they were discovering as scholars printed new editions of the New Testament. They did not know how to reconcile these diversities with the idea of the inspiration. “To such minds,” Connybeare says, “Lachmann’s edition, which set aside with contempt the entire Textus Receptus, savoured of open blasphemy, and in a hundred keys they let him know it” [17].

After 28 years of work, two Cambridge scholars, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, publish in 1881 *The New Testament in Original Greek*, which relied extensively on Tischendorf’s foregoing work [18]. They too, got reproached and reviled, [19] especially because their edition opened a definitive way apart from Textus Receptus. However, today the modern Critical editions look more like Westcott and Hort text, than like Textus Receptus.

3. Translations of the New Testament

In order to grasp the implications of the former translations in the vernacular languages we need a little introduction into the West-European history of the Christian bible. By the time Jerome’s *Vulgata* was finalized in about AD 405, Latin was the language of literature, fairly well understood especially in the cities, and it continued to be so for centuries to come, in spite of the sinking of the Roman Empire in AD 476. However, beginning in the 600s, portions of *Vulgata* came to be translated in Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. The Catholic Church was reluctant to laity having access to the

Bible, hence to translations, which would have made the Bible understandable to those. There were fortunate exceptions such as King Louis IX of France, which ordered a translation into French, and Beghards and Beguins in Germany and Waldensians in France, who emphasized personal reading of the bible, that is, in their own language [15, p. 136].

The first example of a translation which brought a great deal of distress upon the author is the Wycliffe Bible, an extremely literal translation from Latin, made under the supervision of John Wycliffe (1330-1384), a pre-reformer Oxford scholar. Henry Kington, a contemporary historian, describes the resentfulness of the Catholic clergy toward his endeavour, which is recorded to have said that by translating the Gospel into the language of the people, it meant that Wycliffe took the pearl entrusted to the Church as threw it before swine [20]. Not only for this, but also for his views often in competition with the ones held by the Church, the pope ordered five times to arrest Wycliffe and the Catholic Church in England tried him three times. He has been protected by his friends and during his life time, he was never convicted as a heretic. No wonder that the Church exhumed his body in 1428 and burned his bones to ashes.

Other pre-Reform less known examples include situations when the publisher refused to print out its name and address because of prohibitions that vernacular Bibles to be released on the market. A prohibition scholars are aware of is the Censor's Edict issued by the archbishop of Mainz in 1486 [21]. We also know of a Catalan translation, printed in 1478 at Valencia, which being "proscribed and burnt ... no complete copy survives" [22].

A famous and unfortunate example in the area of the New Testament translated into vernacular English is that of William Tyndale's [15, p. 170; 23]. Sir Thomas More, in spite of his humanistic pursuits and his friendship with Erasmus, whose Greek New Testament Tyndale used, developed a cutting debate against Tyndale's translation into English [24]. He wrote in his *Dialogue* that the work does not deserve to be called 'the New Testament', but the testament of his [Tyndale's] master Antichrist. Antwerp, Tyndale's residence in his last years, was a free city, a status that protected him from any Catholic oppression. Yet, he was deceitfully kidnapped and brought on the domains of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. For political and religious reasons Tyndale was convicted a heretic, imprisoned for one year and a half and in August 1536 handed over to the secular administration to execute him.

4. Synthesis and conclusions

One would probably consider textual criticism less problematic than historical criticism. Before the twentieth century, the former was even labelled 'lower criticism' as opposed to the latter, called 'higher criticism'. Textual criticism is delving into the tedious but rewarding manuscript comparison with the target of identifying as objectively as possible the most probable original rendering. The initial worries of the Church at large with respect to the

outgrowth of textual criticism methods related to the issue of authority, of both the bible as the word of God, and the Church as the originator of dogmatic propositions. At times, textual critics challenged Christian doctrines based on Greek inferior manuscripts or the Latin Vulgata. As a consequence they have been ostracized at best, but not seldom, pursued professionally, and rarely in a physical manner.

How to distinguish between undermining the New Testament authority and the task of making it more accurate? One of the best answers is to wait and allow time to justify or discard one's critical pursuits. In all cases, the new discoveries and later research proved the points that alerted the Church previously.

The Church's authority in the West has been much more confronted by the translations in the vernaculars. This was simply because the Vulgata was held in a supreme esteem, but also because for laity to have access to the text of the Bible, meant that the Church is no more the only source of religious knowledge. History testifies of cases of real martyrs, who were not extremists but intellectuals of first class.

Jaroslav Pelikan discusses and re-examines *The Idea of University*, which was dealt with first by J.H. Newman. According to both, the heart of the University is "freedom of inquiry" [25] which should not be infringed by anyone, academic or cleric. Though how to use this freedom to a positive end is another discussion, it suffices now to just say that the best way to react to academic activity that seems pernicious is by academic activity of a different perspective. Dialogue has always been profitable, both in terms of relationships and the discovery of new shades.

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