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RE-EXAMINING NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL-CRITICAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES USED TO NEGATE INERRANCY

James A. Borland*

Perhaps it is not shocking to assert that Satan uses every means at his disposal to attack the credibility, reliability and authority of God's Word. He began the assault in the garden with Eve and has not stopped yet. But often his ways are more subtle than the blatant lie succumbed to by Eve. We live in a modern era of sophistication. Even in Biblical and textual studies we hear more and more about the use of computers and other highly technical tools. And Satan is more than willing to accommodate our sophistication in the area of textual criticism. Especially is this so when it occasionally allows men to assert fallibility in the NT autographs based on widely accepted principles and practices of textual criticism.

Historically the period 1830-1880 was one of gathering information, collating more NT manuscripts, and proposing and evaluating textual theories. Griesbach, Lachmann, Tregelles and Tischendorf dominated the field. By 1880, however, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort advanced a new textual theory. With minor changes it was adopted by the scholarly world and has proven to be the guiding force in the field for the past century. In simple terms the Westcott and Hort theory distinguishes between various textual families of MSS commonly known today as Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine, Caesarean, etc. The theory postulates the Alexandrian to be a fairly early text while holding the Byzantine to have originated not earlier than the first quarter of the fourth century A.D. It further advocates the primacy of the two earliest uncial MSS, Aleph (Sinaiticus) and B (Vaticanus), which date from the middle of the fourth century A.D. These two MSS were given the question-begging designation of being the "neutral text."

In short, the resultant practice of these new sophisticated principles was to completely overturn the textual critical practices of the past. Since the majority Byzantine text was judged to be a later text, the supposedly more ancient, more pure neutral text was substituted at the junctures of innumerable variants. The overwhelming majority of these changes did not materially affect the text, often involving only slight differences in word order or variations in spelling. Frequently, however—and in many cases for good reasons—words, phrases, or even whole sentences and verses were removed from the commonly accepted text. A perusal of the footnotes of some modern translations (*RSV*, *NASB*, *NEB*, *NIV*) will give an example of how extensively these textual critical principles have been followed in our generation.

In referring to the Westcott and Hort theory George Ladd approvingly writes, "The basic solution to the textual problem has been almost universally accept-

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ed."¹ He goes on to assert that "it is a seldom disputed fact that critical science has to all intents and purposes recovered the original text of the New Testament."² Ladd believes that "in the search for a good text, piety and devotion can never take the place of knowledge and scholarly judgment."³ Yet it is precisely this "almost universally accepted" "knowledge and scholarly judgment" that if rightly followed too often leads to the conclusion that the very autographs of Scripture recorded errors and blunders.

Everett F. Harrison notes a trend toward re-evaluating the Byzantine text since some early papyri indicate that particular readings of the majority text are frequently older than those of the so-called neutral text. This has resulted in an eclectic methodology in which the scholar seeks to "give weight to all the factors in the situation."⁴ He maintains, however, that the significance of this "only means that Byzantine readings should be taken into account instead of being dismissed out of hand."⁵ Harrison also believes that in this eclectic approach "the relegation of the external evidence to a secondary role is almost inevitable."⁶ This is highly unfortunate. J. Harold Greenlee points out that "to disregard external evidence and depend too completely upon internal evidence may lead to unduly subjective decisions."⁷ Instead a balance of consideration must exist between the external and the internal evidence.

Westcott and Hort, however, developed a species of circular reasoning that practically eliminated a reasoned consideration of the mass of MSS that compose the external evidence. They held that the best external evidence was to be found in those MSS that contained the "best readings." Of course the "best readings" were to be seen in their "neutral text." To establish what were the preferred readings they argued on the basis of two concepts: (1) Intrinsic probability seeks to determine which of the variant readings is characteristic of the author; (2) transcriptional probability seeks to ascertain which of the variant readings may have originated from the scribes and copyists. The first canon, as one might imagine, has been subject to misuse and speculation even by the most careful and pious scholars. Its basis is fairly subjective. The second canon takes note of both the intentional and unintentional changes that scribes sometimes introduced into the

¹G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 77. But G. D. Fee claims that Hort's genealogical method was rejected, resulting in the modern eclectic method noted below; "The Textual Criticism of the New Testament," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1. 419-433; "Rigorous or Reasoned Eclecticism—Which?," *Studies in New Testament Language and Text* (ed. J. K. Elliott; Leiden: Brill, 1976) 174-197.

²Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism* 80. Fee is equally bold in asserting that "the task of NT textual criticism is virtually completed"; "Modern Textual Criticism and the Revival of the Textus Receptus," *JETS* 21 (1978) 19-33. But note I. A. Moir's word of caution regarding the UBS text; "Can We Risk Another 'Textus Receptus'?" *JBL* 100 (1981) 614-618.

³Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism* 81.

⁴E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 82.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷J. H. Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 119.

text of a MS. Additions due to harmonization, explanation, dittography and conflation have been recognized. Omissions unhappily occur due to haplography, homoioteleuton, and perhaps intentional editing. Various other changes may have come through theological controversy and even through the work of heretics and adversaries of the Church.

The basic rules used to decide cases of internal evidence have often been stated and may be summarized as follows: (1) Prefer the reading that best explains the rise of other variants; (2) prefer the shorter reading; (3) prefer the more difficult reading; (4) prefer the reading most characteristic of the author. Naturally each of these canons to a large degree must be subjectively applied. When a decision is difficult in the area of the internal evidence of readings, scholars often resort to the old circular reasoning that "certain MSS tend to support the 'original' text more often than others and that those MSS are the early Alexandrian. Therefore, when internal evidence cannot decide," Gordon Fee advises, "the safest guide is to go with the 'best' MSS."⁸ Thus all too often external evidence is the last resort, and when it is appealed to the results already have been determined by a preconception of which MSS are the "best." A safer alternative will be outlined in the final section of this paper, but first let us notice several examples of this prevalent textual-critical method that result in the full-blown assertions that the autographs did indeed contain incontrovertible mistakes. In other words, the prevalent textual methodology can be and is being used to deny the inerrancy of the original autographs.

Nearly a century ago George Salmon astutely observed that Westcott and Hort had attributed to the gospel writers "erroneous statements which their predecessors had regarded as copyists' blunders." Salmon noted that "there was indeed but little rhetorical exaggeration in the statement that the canon of these editors was that Codex B was infallible and that the Evangelists were not. Nay, it seemed as if Hort regarded it as a note of genuineness if a reading implies error on the part of the sacred writer."⁹

I. THE CASE OF ASA AND AMON

One example of current import is found in the readings of Matt 1:7, 10. These texts contain part of the kingly genealogy of Christ. Many conservative commentators seem almost oblivious to the problem.¹⁰ But scholars who do not adhere to the doctrine of inerrancy do not pass up a chance to point out what they consider to be a fallacy in Matthew's autograph. The majority of all MSS read *Asa* (Asa; v 7) and *Amōn* (Amon; v 10), easily recognized as two kings of Judah through whom Christ descended. Matthew's point is to demonstrate our Lord's royal lin-

⁸Fee, "Textual Criticism of the New Testament" 431.

⁹G. Salmon, *Some Thoughts on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1897) 26.

¹⁰No mention of the question is found in J. A. Alexander (London, 1861), D. Thomas (London, 1873), A. Plummer (London, 1909), or even A. Carr's *Cambridge Greek Testament* commentary. Even such careful exegetes as R. C. H. Lenski and W. Hendriksen in over 1000 pages each seem unaware of the questioned reading. J. Broadus and H. Alford avoid comment and append only one line to note an alternate reading.

eage. But the *UBSGNT* text chooses instead alternate readings based on what they consider the "better" manuscripts as well as some very subjective internal considerations. They substitute for the kings Asa and Amon the names "Asaph" and "Amos," a psalmist and a prophet respectively. They reason that "the evangelist may have derived material for the genealogy, not from the Old Testament directly, but from subsequent genealogical lists, in which the erroneous spelling occurred."¹¹ Prior to that confident assertion Metzger *et al.* claimed that "most scholars are impressed by the overwhelming weight of textual evidence supporting *Asaph*."¹²

What is the composition of this "overwhelming weight of textual evidence" in favor of the *Asaph* blunder? Heading the list are the fourth- and fifth-century codices Aleph, B and C. Next come the minuscules of families 1 and 13 and two eleventh- and twelfth-century cursives, 700 and 1071, followed by fourteenth-century manuscript 209. Among the versions are several OL MSS, notably k, Bobiensis, a fourth- or fifth-century production, along with others of the seventh century and beyond. The Coptic, following the basic Egyptian text of Aleph and B, agrees, and the Armenian, Ethiopic and Georgian translations, each perhaps related to Caesarean origins (of f¹ and f¹³), indicate *Asaph* also. In the Harclean Syriac it merits only a listing in the margin. In summary, barely more than a dozen Greek MSS carry the *Asaph* reading, followed by a few OL MSS, the Coptic and several minor versions.

On the other hand the expected reading of *Asa* is found in literally hundreds of Greek witnesses beginning with uncials E K L M S U V W Γ Δ and Π. These MSS date from the fifth through the tenth centuries and no doubt represent a wide geographical distribution, including Washingtoniensis (the Freer Gospels of the fifth century) and Regius (L), which in Metzger's opinion has a good type of text, "agreeing very frequently with codex Vaticanus."¹³ In addition, hundreds of cursives lend their support including numbers of those known to "exhibit a significant degree of independence from the so-called Byzantine manuscript tradition."¹⁴ These would include 33 (the queen of the cursives and constant ally of Aleph and B) and other minuscules beginning with the ninth century. To this may be added the entire bulk of the cursive MSS that must represent nearly every geographical point where Greek was studied and copied throughout the middle ages and demonstrates an unbroken continuity of evidence sorely lacking in the paucity of material supporting the *Asaph* reading.

The lectionaries too stand solidly behind *Asa*, as do a number of OL MSS including the notable fourth-century Vercellensis. The entire Vg is another early and uniform witness to *Asa* as are the Curetonian, Sinaitic, Peshitta, Harclean and Palestinian versions of the Syriac. To these may be added both Epiphanius and Augustine of the first quarter of the fifth century. Only a preconceived notion

¹¹B. M. Metzger *et al.*, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: UBS, 1971) 1.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (2d ed.; New York: Oxford, 1968) 54.

¹⁴Metzger, *Textual Commentary* xvii.

as to which witnesses were supposedly the best to begin with would cause anyone to deny that the truly "overwhelming weight of textual evidence" clearly favors the traditional reading of Asa.

If such is the case—and I submit that it is—then Asaph should be viewed as an early scribal blunder unjudiciously copied into fortunately but a handful of Greek MSS. The evidence for Amon versus Amos in Matt 1:10 is somewhat similar. It is difficult to believe that Matthew, no doubt an educated literary Jewish writer, was incapable of distinguishing between the Hebrew 'āsā' and 'āsāp or between the even more distinguishable 'āmōn and 'āmōs. Not only would he have known the names of Israel's kings by memory, but he probably would have used the 1 Chr 3:10-14 genealogy in securing the names he used.

Lest one thinks this all amounts to academic irrelevance, we should be aware that the RSV places the prophet's name Amos in the text of Matt 1:10 with the note "other authorities read Amon." The Catholic NAB (1970) reads Amos without explanation. The ASV, RSV and NASB each read Asa for Matt 1:7 but append a note indicating that the Greek reads Asaph. But where does the reading for Asa come from if not also the Greek? The ASV and NASB do the same for Amos in Matt 1:10, and the JB is similar. This nomenclature is certainly inconsistent with the usual way of introducing a textual variant, to say the least. It might lead us to believe that Matthew got his kings, prophets and psalmists a bit confused.

II. THE CASE OF LUKE 23:45

But the case of Luke 23:45 is equally striking, if not more so, and has led numerous Bible translators and commentators to blatantly question Luke's intelligence.

Each of the synoptic gospels in describing the crucifixion events contains the identical phrase *skotos egeneto*, "There was darkness" (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44). Only Luke adds an additional phrase with regard to the sun. The uncials A C³ K Q R W X Γ Δ Θ Π Ψ and 0117 read *kai eskotisthē ho hēlios*, "and the sun was darkened" (D agrees, but replaces *kai* with *de*). This is also the reading of families 1 and 13 as well as practically every minuscule manuscript in existence. A host of lectionaries concur. The OL, Vg, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic and Slavonic versions are unanimous in their testimony to this text. Among the Church fathers this is the reading of Marcion (A.D. 140), the *Diatessaron* (170), Hippolytus (200), Origen, Tertullian, Julius Africanus, Athanasius, Ephraem Syrus, Gregory Nazianzen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Cyril of Alexandria. Even Lachmann and Tregelles favor this text.

A second reading, however, places sun in a genitive absolute phrase, *tou hēliou ekliptomtos*. The translation of this phrase will be discussed below. Support for this reading is found in the third-century p⁷⁵ (Bodmer) and the uncials Aleph, C* and L. Not a single Greek MS besides these four can be found to substantiate this text, nor can a single version be shown to favor this reading. Only Origen (who did not accept the reading) and Cyril of Jerusalem can be cited among the ancients who know this text. A similar reading substitutes the present participle *ekleiptontos* for the second aorist participle *ekliptomtos*. This word finds support in p^{75c}, B, the Coptic and several lectionaries.

Clearly the earliest testimony, as well as catholicity and variety, combine with the vast numerical superiority of the first reading, "the sun was darkened." In addition the lack of continuity for the second reading should be viewed as a fatal flaw. Nevertheless the second reading is adopted by Westcott and Hort with the present tense of *ekleipō*¹⁶, and the UBS and Nestle's text chooses the aorist of the same verb. That reading is evident in the translations of ASV, *Moffat*, *Twentieth Century*, RSV, *New Berkeley*, *Goodspeed*, *Phillips*, *Authentic*, NEB, NASB, TEV, NAB, JB and NIV. Most of these translations clearly teach that the words *tou heliou eklipontos* mean that the sun was eclipsed by the moon. When *ekleipō* is used in relation to the sun that is precisely what it indicates.¹⁶

Moffatt says that the darkness was "owing to an eclipse of the sun"; the *Twentieth Century* version says "the sun being eclipsed"; the *Authentic Version* reads "due to an eclipse of the sun"; *Phillips* says "for there was an eclipse of the sun"; NEB says "the sun was in eclipse"; *New Berkeley* says "due to the sun's eclipse"; NAB reads "with an eclipse of the sun"; and JB says "with the sun eclipsed." The RSV note says "or the sun was eclipsed. Other ancient authorities read the sun was darkened." The ASV, NASB, TEV and NIV, based on the same Greek reading, each say the sun failed or stopped shining, without specifying an eclipse as the cause.

Thus the textual-critical guidelines that tolerated and even promoted this ill-advised, poorly-attested reading have given rise to numerous bold assertions of errors in the autographs. The reason for this is that a solar eclipse is impossible astronomically during the full moon of the Passover when sun and moon are 180 degrees apart in relation to the earth. This is why A. R. C. Leaney tersely comments on Luke 23:45: "Strange, since the Greek would naturally mean 'the sun being eclipsed,' impossible at the time of full moon."¹⁷ S. MacLean Gilmour declared, "Probably even Mark's version was intended to imply an eclipse but Luke makes this explanation explicit."¹⁸ Similarly William Manson writes, "Luke or his source rationalize by adding 'owing to an eclipse of the sun.' A solar eclipse was of course impossible at the Passover time—which had to coincide with the full moon—but Luke might not have known this."¹⁹ A. B. Bruce observes of *tou heliou eklipontos* that "this phrase . . . ought to mean the sun being eclipsed, an impossibility when the moon is full. If all that was meant was the sun's light to-

¹⁶B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction, Appendix* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1896) 69-71.

¹⁶See G. A. Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1929) 139, who cites Luke 23:45 to indicate "the sun in an eclipse"; J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book, 1886) 197 claims it was often used in classical Greek from Thucydides onward for "the failing or eclipse of the light of the sun and the moon"; A. T. Robertson agrees as to that normal usage in connection with the heavenly bodies (*Word Studies in the New Testament* [Nashville: Broadman, 1930], 2. 287). See also J. W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (London: John Murray, 1883) 61-65; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930) 195-196.

¹⁷A. R. C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (2d ed.; London: Black, 1966) 287.

¹⁸S. M. Gilmour, "The Gospel According to St. Luke," *IB*, 8. 412.

¹⁹W. Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Harper, 1930) 261.

tally failing, darkness, e.g., by a sand storm, the natural expression would be *eskotisthē*.”²⁰ H. K. Luce concluded of the supposed eclipse and similar events that “these portents are legendary additions to the story made with the idea that miraculous occurrences must have attended such an event as the death of the Son of God.”²¹ Unfortunately the widely accepted canons of NT textual criticism have allowed these statements to be uttered with virtual impunity.

Some conservatives, in an effort to save Luke’s credibility, argue for a non-eclipse translation of *eklipontos* based on its usage in the NT and elsewhere. Appearing only four times in the NT, *ekleipō* is used figuratively twice (of the failing of money and of faith, Luke 16:9; 22:32) and once of years coming to an end (Heb 1:12). However, it is never used of the supernatural darkening of the sun or moon (unless this is the exception) for the simple reason that it would signify a literal eclipse. When the sun and moon are said to be supernaturally darkened in the Olivet discourse (Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24) and in the cataclysms of the Apocalypse (Rev 8:12; 9:2) the verb *skotizomai* is selected. The figurative use of the latter verb is limited to the other three of its eight NT occurrences (Rom 1:21; 11:10; Eph 4:18). The heavenly bodies are always in view when it is used of a literal darkening. I would submit that such is the case in Luke 23:45 also.

Having discussed external evidence, resulting translations, and views of Luke’s untrustworthiness, let us briefly examine the internal evidence regarding Luke 23:45. Intrinsic probability might argue that Luke twice used *ekleipō* (16:9; 22:32) and may have used it a third time for the sun’s failing. However, Luke was an astute Greek writer and was aware of the usual connotation his intended readers would gain from *ekleipō* when connected with *hēlios*.²² This awareness may have caused him to use *skotizomai*. Also Luke no doubt was aware of the repeated oral tradition that resulted in the use of the latter verb for the darkening of the sun in both Matthew and Mark. Then again, although Luke is fond of the genitive absolute the sentence under consideration contains a finite verbal construction on either side of the questioned phrase. Additionally the verbs form a string of aorists, the third of which is aorist passive. It would seem that the better argument could be made for Luke’s use of the finite aorist passive construction of *skotizomai* rather than the genitive absolute of *ekleipō*.

Transcriptional probability also might be argued both ways. H. A. W. Meyer believes some early scribes (like C² and 33) omitted the darkening phrase in v 45 because of the previous *skotos egeneto* of v 44. He postulates that others added the eclipse phrase as a gloss.²³ Alfred Plummer says, “The fact that it might mean an eclipse, and that an eclipse was known to be impossible, would tempt copyists to substitute a phrase that would be free from objection; whereas no one

²⁰A. B. Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; reprint 1961), 1. 461.

²¹H. K. Luce, ed., *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Cambridge: University Press, 1936) 246.

²²Classical Greek regularly used *ekleipō* with *hēlios* to indicate an eclipse; see Thayer and others listed under n. 16.

²³H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book of the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884) 560-561.

would want to change *eskotisthē ho hēlios*."²⁴ But this argument can run both ways. Origen thought it possible that some early readers may have assumed an eclipse took place because of the darkness of v 44 and as a result altered the text accordingly.²⁵ But both Origen and Jerome thought the eclipse phrase was more likely due "to the enemies of Revelation who sought in this way to provide themselves with a pretext for cavil."²⁶ Unhappily our widely accepted textual-critical principles and practices may help to accommodate them in their jesting against the inerrancy of Scripture.

III. CONCLUSION

In closing I would like to propose that more care be given to examining both internal and external evidence. The subjectivity of the former should not be allowed to overshadow the reality of the latter. We need to take a hard look at MSS that are supposedly the "best" and yet suggest errors in the autographs. Some yield too readily to long-held concepts about the purity of certain texts and overlook the full wealth of the external evidence.²⁷ In our search for antiquity we must not overlook the many early versions, Church fathers and even the later uncials. In evaluating the geographical spread of MSS we must not ignore the mass of cursive witnesses that must have come from every part of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.²⁸ In our quest for the true reading we must not confine ourselves to a few early MSS while forgetting the thousands of MSS that each bear an independent testimony to the text. Virtually no MSS are known to be copies of any others in existence. A final caution is to suspect any variant supported only by a few early witnesses. Any claim to genuineness should have at least some substantial testimony down through the ages. The latter is precisely what was totally lacking in the eclipse phrase of Luke 23:45.

If we accept the inerrancy of the Scriptures and yet countenance a textual criticism that voids inerrancy, something is amiss—and I would suggest that it is not the Word of God that needs reconsideration but rather our principles of textual criticism. For too long, lower criticism has been guided by those who cared little about the inerrancy of the autographs. The time has come for a change. We must re-examine and divorce ourselves from a biased, narrow and settled view of the field. Unless we do, it will not be long before some in our own ranks will be singing the tune against inerrancy.

²⁴A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel According to St. Luke* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1925) 537.

²⁵Burton, *Revision Revised* 63.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷To this end I believe J. W. Burton's principles for evaluating textual evidence should be given careful consideration. Originally published in *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels Vindicated and Established* (ed. E. Miller; London: Bell, 1896), they have been given greater visibility more recently by W. N. Pickering, "John William Burton and the New Testament," *True or False* (ed. D. O. Fuller; Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International, 1972) 248-274; *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Nelson, 1980) 139-148.

²⁸It is instructive to remember that practically the entire corpus of the NT autographs was sent originally to Asia Minor and Europe—e.g. Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae, Crete, Asia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Galatia, etc. The earliest generations of copies would have been made in those same areas. It is perhaps fortunate that the great majority of our extant MSS come to us from those very areas.