

The Romance of the Greek New Testament

DR. HERMAN A. HOYT

I. THE WRITING AND MULTIPLICATION OF MANUSCRIPTS

The New Testament did not come into existence, as popularly held in some circles, as a finished product dropped down from the sky. It was God's practical answer to the growing needs of the new society of believers, this provision being made through His appointed servants and over a period of some fifty years. Book by book the New Testament was written and received within the Church.

Like people today, early Christians were more interested in the living, fervent voice of their favorite preacher or apostle. But though the apostles as itinerant preachers and evangelists often revisited certain churches, and in this way met all the early needs, there came a time when personal presence was no longer possible for one reason or another. To meet the pressing needs of their converts, they wrote letters to them. Luke wrote to a Christian friend by the name of Theophilus to strengthen his faith (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). James wrote to encourage fellow Christians in the midst of suffering (Jas. 1:1-4). Paul wrote to counteract the doctrinal errors sown by wandering fakers (Gal. 1: 6-9), to correct the life and conduct of believers (I Cor. 1:10), and to challenge them in the way of life and hope (Rom. 12:1f). By the close of the first century of the Christian era every book of the New Testament was written and in the hands of Christian people.

You can imagine how these people received a letter from their favorite preacher. When the letter arrived, the whole church was called together, and one of the group, who could read, read the letter through

from beginning to end, while all sat wrapped in silence. Once and again, upon later occasions, the letter was read in its entirety to the whole group. After each meeting many curious eyes were turned upon the letter and many hands handled it. The very fragile and brittle papyrus scroll soon showed signs of disintegration and this produced grave concern among the members. One brother suggested to the leader of the group that a copy should be made. The church deliberated and reached the same conclusion. A scribe was hired, the copy was made, and the old letter was placed in a receptacle of the church for safekeeping. Later on other copies had to be made, and the multiplication of copies went on. In other churches, the situation was a bit different. Being the first in order to receive a letter that was intended for a number of churches, copies were immediately made so that the letter could be sent on to others. Or perhaps the first church kept the original and sent the copies on. However, within a few years, or perhaps even months, the originals had disappeared, and copies were made from other copies. After a few years there were copies of copies of copies, and after some centuries the copies were removed from the original by thousands of copyings.

By 1611 when the Authorized Version, so popular today, was translated, the manuscripts used by the scholars in this famous venture had gone through 1500 years of copying. But in spite of that, those manuscripts were remarkably accurate, and no one need fear that he is in danger of being led away from the truth by reading the version based upon them.

II. THE FORMATION OF THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

As a youth of nineteen I fell into conversation with a doctor of medicine concerning

A paper read before the Foreign Language Conference, at the University of Kentucky, April 2, 1949.

the Bible. To my amazement he declared that the New Testament was the product of a group of long-haired theologians who had fabricated this story and then had conspired to propagate it in a book known as the New Testament. Shocking, indeed, it was to me, and that is putting the matter mildly. Every moral sensibility of my being rebelled at the thought. But in my experience and lack of information I could do nothing more than deny the allegation. It was indeed encouraging to discover in later years, that the best scholarship of the centuries and incontrovertible evidence indisputably refuted the explanation of the doctor and revealed that he spoke out of the abundance of his ignorance. In considering the New Testament Canon, it should never be forgotten that many books were written during and shortly after the time in which the New Testament was written. The amazing thing is that 27 books were selected from the many and constitute to this day the limits of the New Testament canon.

Some have urged that the selection and approval of these 27 books was by action of a universal church council during the first few hundred years of the Christian era. It is insisted that at one of these conferences, or perhaps several, it was decided what books should go into the New Testament and what books should be left out. But the answer to this is so conclusive that it should never be proposed again. From Pentecost to the present there has never been a universal church council. And even in the limited councils of the church during the early centuries no action was ever taken to determine the limits of the New Testament canon.

Others have suggested that scholars decided the limits of the canon. Without a doubt scholars would have enjoyed the privilege. Many insist today that this is their prerogative. But all scholars will admit that none ever exercised this right, even though, in their estimation, this is the way it should be. The privilege and joy of tracing the history of the canon is the most that has ever fallen to their lot. And in the providence of God it could have been

no other way. When has there ever been a group of scholars who have agreed on the New Testament canon? And where has there ever been a group who were sure after they agreed? To this day there are those who would include books not now in the New Testament and exclude some books that are there. And while the scholars were trying to decide on the limits of the canon, what would the church have done? Life must go on. Needs must be met. Trials must be surmounted. The Church must grow. And the New Testament provided for each need as it arose and is doing the same for the church today.

To this fact, namely, the creation and establishing of the New Testament canon, there is just one sufficient explanation. It is this, the providential working of God in and through the spiritual life of His people. As needs arose in the career of His people, God worked in and through His servants to provide the proper message by letter or book for them. Little by little the record was completed. From time to time as the books were completed they were sent to their destination and circulated among other Churches. At every reading believers recognized in them a divine quality answering their needs. Other books too reached them, but outside of possessing spiritual tone and excellent reading matter, there was not in anyone of them that quality which could be labeled "the word of God." Near the close of the first century, or shortly after the outset of the second, the books were collected into one volume. And the number has neither increased nor diminished in all the succeeding centuries. Each generation of believers has read the New Testament and concurred in the approval made by the early Christians, for they have found, as did their progenitors in the faith to whom this body of literature was inscribed, that it satisfied every spiritual need and heart-felt longing.

III. THE FINDING OF THE GREAT NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

Within the past several centuries scholars became interested in new light shed upon the sacred text from old manuscripts.

From the dust heaps of the centuries, from isolated and forgotten monasteries, from musty libraries and piles of debris, there has come to the attention of scholars some of the most invaluable literary treasures. Six great manuscripts including parts or all of the New Testament have yielded up their treasures to the probing minds of trained men, so that today, the text of the New Testament as it came from the pens of the apostles has been almost completely if not altogether restored. Among these manuscripts is the Sinaiticus found by a young German linguist, Tischendorf, in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. There is the ancient and venerable Vaticanus manuscript located in the Vatican library in Rome. The pains-taking efforts of that persistent saint and scholar, Samuel Tregelles, made available its inestimable values. The Alexandrinus, the Codex Ephraemi, the Codex Bezae, and the Washingtoniensis all came into the hands of men who were thirsting to restudy the text of the New Testament and confirm or correct it, so that the most precious message ever communicated to men might be possessed and applied in all of its purity and power.

Young Tischendorf was traveling through the East in search of old manuscripts when he came to the monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai. Though he searched the institution through, he found nothing of value, until by accident his eyes fell upon discarded leaves of an old manuscript in a waste basket. His trained eyes told him that these were what he sought. Upon learning from the steward that these discarded leaves were being used to light fires, he insisted that less precious material be used. This chance remark placed the monks on guard and prevented further investigation on this trip. He departed with the forty-three leaves rescued from the waste basket, and in nine years returned again, but with no success. Six years later he returned again under the patronage of the Czar of Russia. When in conversation with the steward, he showed him a copy of the Septuagint he had recently published, the steward, not to be outdone,

also produced a copy of the Septuagint, a mere heap of leaves wrapped in an old red cloth. There before the astonished eyes of the scholar lay the very manuscript he had been hunting for 15 years. Concealing his surprise as best he could he asked for the privilege to look it over. Closeted with this literary find that night, it would have been sacrilege to sleep. With the close scrutiny of a trained scholar he examined the entire manuscript and copied the text of one book. Later, by bringing the influence of the Czar to bear upon the monks, this manuscript was given as a gift to the head of the Greek orthodox church for a sum of some \$7,000.00 It was later transferred to St. Petersburg, and quite recently was purchased by the British museum for the magnificent sum of \$500,000.00.

To this might be added the stirring accounts of the acquisition of other leading manuscripts, to say nothing about the thousands of fragments that have been unearthed in some of the most obvious and others in the most out-of-the-way places. No stories of ingenious minds can quite compare with the romance of this tale.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCIENCE OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The discoveries of treasure hunters through the past few centuries have placed in the hands of textual students such a wealth of material that they found themselves floundering for want of a method to use this source material. Literally thousands of manuscripts have been laid at the feet of the scholars. These consist, for the most part, of fragments of the Greek New Testament, many of them containing an older text than the great manuscripts. Besides these, many old versions of the New Testament have been found, and to this may be added the words from the pens of early church fathers. This vast collection of source material, as it increased, cried more loudly for some system by which it might be used for the work at hand.

In the middle of the nineteenth century two English scholars, Westcott and Hort, geniuses in this field, turned their tremendous learning to this task. Building upon

the growing foundation of predecessors in this field, they perfected the science of textual criticism. For twenty eight years they pursued, with painstaking labors, this project, until in 1881 they brought forth an edition of the Greek New Testament that has not been superseded to this day. In turn it became the basis for the English and American revisions of the Authorized Version.

So accurate became the science of textual criticism that only one one-thousandth of the text was any longer in question. And

this portion of the text does not involve any vital doctrine of the Christian faith. The words of Jesus Christ may therefore be intoned with even greater surety today. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35.) As long as new information comes to light, it may be expected that it will continue to purify and confirm the canon and text of the New Testament. And the romance which began in those days of yore, and has continued to the present, will bear on through to the end.