

The Relation Between Textual Criticism and Systematic Theology

Scripture is central to our theological disciplines. But do the disciplines of Systematic Theology and Textual Criticism ever touch one another? Some text-critics hold that the activity of establishing the wording of the Biblical text is not - or at least not much - affected by the conclusions of systematicians. Reversely, systematicians happily repeat the adage that Systematic Theology is not affected by textual criticism. Either side is content that one can ignore the existence of the other. Are there places in the New Testament where textual variants do become relevant for Systematic Theology? This session will engage a range of well-known textual variants that have an increasingly material impact on how we think about Christ (Mark 1:1; John 1:18; Luke 23:34a), and will also mention a textual variant that has been conveniently ignored in the ethics of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:38). Apart from these places where text-critics should have a conversation with their theological colleagues, there is also an area where theologians ought to have a conversation with text-critics. And this conversation revolves around the question of what does it mean that the church has to engage in textual criticism? How does this fit into how we think about the Bible, providence, and the church?

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1. Introduction

a. TC is unaffected by theology: Barthélemy

“However, I bring myself to publish it because I have come to the conclusion that reams written in an overcritical spirit run the risk of concealing the fundamental nature of Holy Scripture: a word of God spoken to his people today, spoken to you and me. Just before writing the ten chapters of this book, I spent ten whole years studying the Palestinian recensions of the Greek Bible made during the first century of the Christian era [...]. I do not belittle it, but I confess it brought me no new light whatsoever on the impact that the Word of God must have on my life.”¹

b. Theology is unaffected by TC: Chicago Statement on Inerrancy

“Since God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission. The verdict of this science, however, is that the Hebrew and Greek text appear to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free.”²

¹ Dominique Barthelemy, *God and His Image: An Outline of Biblical Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), xi-xii

² Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Exposition: Transmission and Translation.

c. Problems in dogmatic treatment of TC:

- i. No sense of scale of the problem
- ii. No examples; therefore no sense of the nature of the problem

2. Three variants that affect the presentation of Christ

a. Mark 1:1 Making Jesus the Son of God

i. External evidence [ECM]:

Mark 1:1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ

txt ⱼ01¹. B03. D05. L019. W032. 706^c. 732. 2148

υἱου του θεου Δ037. 1. 13. 33. 69. 124. 205. 209. 346. 427. 543. 565. 579. 700.
788. 792. 826. 828. 837. 892. 983. 1342. 1424. 1582. 1689. 2193. 2542. 2886. L547.
L844. Byz. [706*. 949C. 1506-2. 1555C]

omit υἱου θεου ⱼ01*. Θ038. 28. 1555*. L2211

ii. 'Son of God' in the Gospel of Mark

iii. Variant affects reading strategy only

b. John 1:18 Only-begotten God

i. External Evidence [NA28]:

μονογενῆς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

txt P66 ⱼ01* B03 C04* L019

ο μον. θεος P75 ⱼ01¹ 33

ο μον. υιος A02 C04³ K017 Γ036 Δ037 Θ038 Ψ044 *f*^{1.13} 565. 579. 700. 892.
1241. 1424 ㉓

ii. Wrong reasons to reject μονογενῆς θεός in the THGNT

iii. Impossible theology?

iv. Johannine language

c. Luke 23:34a What Happened at the Cross?

i. External Evidence [NA28]:

34 [□][[ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔλεγεν· πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἴδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν.]]^ν

34 [□] ^ⱼ75 ^Ɀ2a B D* W Θ 070. 579. 1241 a sy^s sa bo^{pt} | *add. p*) ^Ɀ*.2b (ειπεν loco ελεγεν
πατερ A) C D³ K L N Q Γ Δ Ψ f¹ (- δε f¹³) 33. 565. 700. 892. 1424. 2542. ℓ 844 ^Ɀ
lat sy^{c,p,h} (bo^{pt}; I^{lat}) |

ii. Marginal references [NA28]:

6,27sp! Is 53,12 Act 7,60 ·
Act 3,17! 1K 2,8 Ps 22,19

iii. Two propositions in Luke 23:34a

1. Jesus prays for forgiveness

2. Jesus's persecutors act in ignorance

iv. This variant affects the relative prominence of doctrinal truth

3. The Ethics of Marriage, 1 Corinthians 7:38

- a. KJV “So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better.”
ESV “So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.”

- b. γαμίζω - ἐκγαμίζω
- c. Variant provides lexical clarification, contra modern translations.

4. In conclusion

- a. Textual variants can come close to affecting the arguments within doctrine and ethics
- b. Doctrine and ethics protected by relying on multiple streams of evidence
- c. Doctrine on the question 'what is Scripture?'
 - i. David Parker: “The books survive for us only in certain physical forms, and as a result of a sequence of decisions by editors, copyists and readers. Whatever, therefore, we have to say about these books must reflect these realities. To make theological statements about the character of the New Testament or the Bible, simply shortcutting the most basic text-critical data, and indeed dismissing it as the pedantry of antiquarians or as a dead-end for theology, which must return to a point of view held before these data were known and adequately understood, is in my view dishonest obfuscation. Any theological *a priori*, which says this or that about the New Testament, but with no reference to what the New Testament is, is an arbitrary attempt to impose dogma on reality.”³
 - ii. Scripture's self-attestation
- d. *Prolegomena* to TC:
 - i. What does it mean to do TC on an inspired text? Methodological constraints?
 - ii. What does the need for TC tell us about the nature of Scripture? Is there more to say than 'providence'?

³ D.C. Parker, "Textual Criticism and Theology", *The Expository Times* 118, (2007): 583-89.