

LECTURE I
THE ORIGINAL WRITINGS OF
THE NEW TESTAMENT

‘ For me the archives are Jesus Christ : the inviolable archives are His Cross and Death, and His Resurrection and the faith that is through Him ’ (IGNATIUS, to the Philadelphians, viii.).

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' We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves ' (2 Cor. iv. 7, R.V.).

Introductory.

THE NEW TESTAMENT contains for us the best wisdom in the world, and no effort can be too great to learn all we can regarding its contents and the manner in which they have come down to us.

It is with the latter enquiry that we are specially concerned in the present course of lectures.

All know how easy it is to forget that the New Testament has a history of eighteen hundred years behind it, and that during that period, unless the text had been miraculously preserved, which would have been contrary to God's ordinary mode of dealing, it was subject to all the dangers attending the transmission of any book, however precious, during a long period of years. And the more so, when we remember that during three-fourths of that

period it was subject to the further danger of transmission by copies made by hand. We cannot wonder then that the question has often been raised: What security have we that the original text has been preserved in all essential particulars?

Or, look at it in this way. What of the mass of variant readings of which we hear so much, and for whose existence we have only to point to our Revised Version? No one can compare that Version with the Authorised Version without recognizing that in a large number of cases the Revisers must have had a different Greek text before them, and that, to judge from such marginal notes as 'Some ancient authorities read . . .,' 'Some ancient authorities omit . . .,' and 'The two oldest Greek manuscripts, and some other authorities, omit . . .,' they themselves were often at a loss as to which reading should be preferred.

Of course, if the original writings had survived, there would have been no difficulty in answering these and similar questions. But they have long since perished, either in the ordinary course of tear and wear, or in the destruction of sacred writings which accompanied persecution in the Early Church, and we must look to other measures for confirming our New Testament text.

PLATE I.



FRAGMENTS FROM A PAPYRUS ROLL OF LATE THIRD CENTURY,
CONTAINING ST. JOHN XV. 25--XVI. 2 AND XVI. 21-31.

Discovered at Oxyrhynchus (Oxyrh. Pap. x. 1228), and gifted by the
Egypt Exploration Society to Glasgow University Library. See p. 5.

And here it is that the science of Textual Criticism comes in : for the main function of that discipline is to carry us back behind the vast number of variant readings which have arisen in the history of the New Testament to the exact words of the original writers, so far as these can now be recovered. And here let me say that while it is not possible in the present enquiry to discuss at any length the principles underlying this science, the science itself is based on well-defined rules of procedure and is not the haphazard process which some people are apt to imagine it to be. We shall meet with many illustrations of this from time to time in our enquiry. Meanwhile, let me direct attention to one or two particulars regarding the New Testament as a whole, which have a closer bearing upon its history and transmission than may perhaps at first sight appear.

External Form.

To begin then with the *external form* of the New Testament writings. We know that the books of the Old Testament were written on vellum, but there can be little doubt that the books of the New Testament were written on papyrus rolls in accordance with the general practice of the time. These rolls were so named

because they were formed from the papyrus plant. The pith of the plant was cut into narrow strips, which were laid down vertically to form a lower or outer layer. Over this a second layer was then placed, the strips this time running horizontally, and then the two layers were pressed together to form a web or sheet. A single sheet was, as a rule, 5 to 5½ inches in width and 9 to 11 inches in height, but when more space was required this was easily obtained by fastening a number of sheets together. A roll of twenty sheets, which could be divided at will, was, apparently, a common size for selling purposes. The price naturally depended on the quality of the papyrus, but it cannot have been a cheap substance, and, indeed, was often dearer than the vellum in ordinary use.

The writing was arranged in columns of from two to three inches wide and was, as a rule, confined to the side on which the fibres lay horizontally, technically known as the *Recto*, but it could be extended to the *Verso*, or back, if necessary. A good example is afforded by Rev. v. 1 where, by his reference to 'a book written within and on the back,' the seer evidently wishes us to understand that so great was the number of woes to be recorded that the *Recto* of no ordinary roll could contain them,

and that both sides of the papyrus had to be employed (cf. Ezek. ii. 10).

Used sheets were often turned to different purposes, their first contents having been crossed or washed out (cf. Col. ii. 14), as when we find a private letter written over the effaced notice of a death, or as when the *Verso* of an old taxing-list serves the schoolmaster and his pupil for a writing lesson.

Character of Script.

The *script* in the case of the New Testament writings would doubtless be a careful non-literary hand, which would vary according to the education and skill of the writer. There were no breaks between the words, the letters being run on continuously, so that it is difficult at times to know where one word stops and the next begins. What is implied may be seen by printing a few words of our English New Testament in this way :

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHE
WORDWASWITHGODANDTHEWORDWASGOD

Considerable difficulty must, in consequence, have been caused to copyists, especially if the letters could be divided up in different ways, as when, to use a familiar illustration, 'NOWHERE'

may represent 'NOW HERE' or 'NOWHERE.' Abbreviations in the way of leaving out the last syllables of familiar words were frequent and, as a rule, accents and breathings were only sparingly employed. The bearing of these facts upon the various readings that crept later into our New Testament texts is at once obvious.

As showing the approximate size of the New Testament autographs, it has been calculated that a short Epistle, like the 2nd Epistle to the Thessalonians, would be a roll of about 15 inches in length with the contents arranged in some five columns, while St. Paul's longest Epistle, the Epistle to the Romans, would run to about 11 feet and a half. As regards the Gospels, St. Mark would occupy about 19 feet, and St. Luke about 31 or 32 feet, while the Revelation of St. John might be estimated at 15 feet.¹

Addressing of Rolls.

It remains only to notice that the manuscript when completed was rolled up, much as we roll up a map, and fastened loosely with a string, without going through the formal process of sealing, which was customary in the case of more official documents. The *address* of the

¹ See F. G. Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (London, 1912), p. 34.

Church or person for whom it was intended was added on the outside, and, if we may judge from the general practice of the time, that address was stated in the briefest possible form. No more was needed, seeing that the roll was entrusted for delivery to a passing friend or traveller to whom the address was known, and who would be personally acquainted with any further details required. At the same time, owing to this very brevity of address, many questions which have exercised scholars have arisen. For example : Who were the Galatians to whom St. Paul wrote ? Were they the inhabitants of a district in the north of Asia Minor or of a Roman Province visited by St. Paul on his first and second missionary journeys ? Or again, Is the destination of the Epistle to the Hebrews to be found in Jerusalem, or in Alexandria or in Rome ?

The roll form determined the manner in which its contents were read. Holding the roll in his left hand, the reader gradually unrolled it with his right, rolling up again with his left hand what he had already read. The fact that the roll was not divided into chapters or verses would make quotation very difficult, and, consequently, scribes were apt to trust more to their memories than was consistent with strict accuracy.

Use of Dictation.

Another feature of the New Testament on which fresh light has been thrown is the use of *dictation* by some, at any rate, of its writers. We are apt to think of dictation as a purely modern convenience, but evidence is multiplying as to the large use made of it by all classes of writers from a very early date. Nothing is more common, for example, than to find at the close of a papyrus document such words as 'I, A, on behalf of B, seeing that he was unable to write for himself,' and though an educated man like Paul had no need to have recourse to such an expedient, we may be sure that he would gladly avail himself of the assistance of a pupil or friend in the actual writing of his Epistles. Thus, in Rom. xvi. 22, 'I Tertius, who write the epistle, salute you in the Lord,' we find Tertius definitely claiming to be the writer of the Epistle, and in that capacity sending his own closing greetings along with those of others. And when in 2 Thess. iii. 17 the Apostle adds his authenticating signature, 'The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write,' the natural conclusion is that the body of the Epistle was written by someone else (cf. 1 Cor. xvi. 21; Col. iv. 18). Gal. vi. 11, 'See with how

large letters I have written unto you with mine own hand,' is particularly interesting in this respect, for here we find Paul reminding his converts that contrary to his usual practice he had written to them with his own hand. Why? Was it not because of the severity of the Epistle's contents? With his wonted forbearance and tact the Apostle did not wish that any scribe should come between him and those he was obliged to rebuke in such strong terms, the 'large' letters of which he made use lending further emphasis to what he wrote.

Shorthand.

Along with the use of dictation, the question may be raised, though it cannot be definitely answered, as to the possible use of *shorthand*. Some form of shortened writing was undoubtedly current at the time, and we can now supplement the evidence regarding its use by an interesting papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus of the year A.D. 155.¹ In it, an ex-magistrate apprentices his slave to a shorthand writer for two years. The teacher is to be paid 120 drachmae, of which sum he has already received a first instalment of 40 drachmae. The second instalment is not to be paid until the boy has

¹ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* iv, p. 204 f., No. 724.

learned the whole system, and the third only when he 'writes fluently in every respect and reads faultlessly.' In view of this and similar examples, it would not, then, have been astonishing if certain New Testament scribes had recourse to some such system, but, as has already been stated, this is mere conjecture and may seem to be hardly in keeping with the artless character of the first Christian documents.

Epistolary Form.

Keeping still to points of external contact between our New Testament writings and the general practice of the time, it is interesting to notice that the Epistles or Letters, which form the largest proportion of the books of the New Testament, are couched in the common *epistolary form* of the time. They begin with an address such as 'A to B, heartiest greetings.' This is followed by a prayer for those to whom the letter is addressed, and this again by a thanksgiving for what measure of good fortune has befallen them. Then come the special contents of the letter, the whole ending with greetings and a valediction. Address, Prayer, Thanksgiving, Special Contents, Personal Salutations, and Autographic Conclusion—this with the customary variations is the ordinary form

of a papyrus letter, and by his adoption of it Paul imparted a directly personal note to what are too often exclusively regarded as theological treatises or religious essays.¹

When, then, we think of Paul at work on one of his letters, we can imagine him pacing up and down the room, his thoughts fixed on some distant Church and, as its needs rose up before him, pouring forth his glowing sentences to the scribe sitting at his feet. And when the scribe's work is done, revising what he has written and adding his authenticating signature 'with my own hand Paul' to show that in reality the whole letter comes from him. It would be interesting to know how much Paul left to his scribes. As a rule, he doubtless dictated word for word, but may it not be that in some cases he left a certain amount of freedom to his scribes, which helps us to explain the differences of language and style which have perplexed scholars?

Language.

Nothing has as yet been said of the *language* of the New Testament.

In view of the fact that all its writers, with the probable exception of Luke, were Jews, we

¹ See Additional Note A.—Greek Papyrus Letters.

might naturally have expected that Hebrew or Aramaic would be made use of as in the Old Testament writings, but as a matter of fact recourse was had, in almost every instance, to Greek. Nor is the reason far to seek. At the beginning of the Christian era Greek was in general use throughout the Roman Empire, much as Latin reigned supreme during the Middle Ages, or French in the eighteenth century. It had penetrated even to Palestine, and along with Aramaic was employed by all classes of the population. The relation of the two languages comes out clearly in the striking scene depicted in Acts xxi. 37 ff., where it is obvious that the Jerusalem mob whom Paul addressed from the stairs leading up to Antonia expected that he would have addressed them in Greek, and that it was his falling back on their native Hebrew or Aramaic that led to their being 'the more quiet.'¹

It must be kept in view, however, that this Greek was not the Greek of the great Attic

¹ An interesting parallel may be quoted from a bilingual district of Ireland, where, at a public discussion between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic champion, any approach to a disturbance was at once quelled by a few words in Irish. 'The people were listening to English speeches, but the Irish touched their hearts more nearly.' See T. K. Abbott, *Essays chiefly on the Original Texts of the Old and New Testaments* (London, 1891), p. 164.

writers, but a more common and vernacular language, which was understood and made use of by the great mass of the people. With the bearing of this fact upon the interpretation of the New Testament vocabulary we are not at present directly concerned, but we may note in passing that it led later copyists to improve on what they regarded as the 'vulgarisms' or 'colloquialisms' of the original texts.

Before we leave the external form of our New Testament writings, it may be well to recall two changes which took place at an early date in their history.

Papyrus Codices.

The first of these was the substitution of *papyrus codices* for papyrus rolls. The word 'codex' meant originally the trunk of a tree, then a block of wood split up into leaves or tablets (cf. Luke i. 63 ; Isai. viii. 1, xxx. 8), and then a book or writing whose leaves were not rolled within one another like the papyrus rolls of which we have been thinking, but were laid over one another like the leaves of a book. It is obvious that such a form had many advantages, rendering possible, for example, the use of both sides of the leaf and the consequent gathering of the separate writings into one volume. It was

a form, at any rate, which particularly commended itself to Christian writers from the third century onwards, judging from the number of examples of it which recent discovery has brought to light. One well-known instance is afforded by the leaf of a papyrus book, containing a considerable portion of the first chapter of Matthew, which can claim to be a fragment of one of the oldest manuscripts of any part of the New Testament in existence. It was, again, on the leaf of a papyrus codex that, in 1897, Dr. Grenfell and Dr. Hunt detected what purport to be certain new Sayings of Jesus, and, most recently of all, a papyrus codex going back to the third century has been brought to light, which contained when complete not only all four Gospels, but the book of Acts as well.¹

Parchment.

But there was a further change of still greater moment in the material employed for our New Testament texts when papyrus gave place to *parchment*. Papyrus, though very durable, is, at best, a brittle substance, lending itself readily to *lacunae* or breaks, and a great step forward

¹ See Additional Note B.—Recent Archaeological Discoveries.

was taken towards the preservation of the original text by the adoption of the more durable parchment or vellum, prepared from the skins of calves or other animals. In a rough form parchment was in use before papyrus as a writing material, but towards the close of the second century B.C. a finer substance was produced for literary purposes, and this came to be employed for the great New Testament copies of the fourth century onwards.

Here we may notice the double or even triple use to which sheets of vellum were sometimes put. When scribes were at a loss for a fresh sheet, they not infrequently scraped out the original contents and superimposed new contents. The document then came to be known as a *palimpsest*, literally 'written over again.' In the circumstances the earlier writing was often the more valuable of the two, and, as we shall find, cases are not wanting of rich additions to our Biblical texts coming from some such unexpected sources.

Multiplication of Copies.

In ways such as these, then, we must picture to ourselves the original writings of the New Testament—a number of separate papyrus rolls, or later, of papyrus or parchment codices of

various sizes, written for the most part in colloquial Greek, and circulating only amongst the readers to whom they were in the first instance addressed. But, as time passed, the need of additional copies made itself felt. The Church, which was the happy possessor of one Apostolic epistle or letter, would be encouraged to add others to its collection (cf. Col. iv. 16), while individual believers would also wish copies for themselves. The result was the rapid multiplication of copies of our New Testament books, and, as these copies were made by hand, it was inevitable that they would be exposed to all the dangers attending such a process.

We shall see directly what some of these dangers were. But before we do so it may be well to emphasize two considerations of a general character.

The first was that early copies would be made by the writer's pupils or friends, and that consequently the same degree of accuracy could not be looked for as in the case of the work of professional scribes.

The second was that the New Testament texts were not from the first invested with the same sanctity as were the Old Testament Scriptures, and that at times the scribes would be content if they gave the general sense of a

passage without being too particular as to the exact wording.

Rise of Variant Readings.

Keeping, then, these considerations in view, we have now to ask what was the nature of the *variant readings* of which we have been speaking. They have been classified in different ways, but may be conveniently summed up under the two heads :

- (1) Unintentional,
- (2) Intentional,

although it is not always easy to distinguish between the two.

As regards the *unintentional* variants, we have to reckon with mere slips of the pen which even the most careful copyists find it difficult to avoid. There is again the substitution of one synonymous word for another, or the insertion of a connecting word or proper name for the sake of clearness, as when 'Jesus' takes the place of the indefinite 'He' in such a passage as John vi. 14; or, once more, the frequent changes of order in familiar words or phrases as when 'Jesus Christ' is substituted for 'Christ Jesus' or *vice versa*.

Of a more serious character is what is techni-

cally known as *homoioteleuton*, or the confusion of words or phrases of like ending. Let me cite a description of what is meant. 'Suppose . . . that a transcriber is copying a passage in which the word "disciples" is read at the end of two successive verses. He transcribes the first verse, and then, looking up from his work to the copy before him, his eye unfortunately lights upon the end of the second verse, no part of which has yet been written. He sees the word "disciples" which his pen has just traced; and, not perceiving that the second verse in which it occurs still remains untranscribed, he proceeds with his work, and leaves out that verse altogether. . . . For an example we may refer to Matt. xii. 47. That verse is entirely omitted in some excellent manuscripts. And, for a very obvious reason. It ends in the Greek with exactly the same word as the preceding verse (*λαλῆσαι*, "to speak"), and has thus, in some cases, been altogether overlooked by transcribers.'¹

With this there may be compared what is known as *dittography*, or the writing of the same word twice when it should only be written once.

¹ See *The Words of the New Testament as altered by Transmission and ascertained by Modern Criticism*, by W. Milligan and Alex. Roberts (Edinburgh, 1873), p. 15.

The *intentional* mistakes are equally varied. Thus, as we have already seen (p. 15), there is a tendency on the part of copyists to correct the language and style of the original documents, in the interests, so they imagined, of the documents themselves. And a somewhat similar tendency led to the practice of introducing harmonizing words or phrases, as when the words 'to repentance' are added by the later scribes in Matt. ix. 13 and Mark ii. 17, in order to conform with the text of Luke v. 32, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'

Additions to the original text are also common, in many cases arising from the inclusion of words or phrases in the text which first of all had found a place in the margin. Thus, if you consult a Revised Version you will find that the words in John v. 4, 'For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in, was made whole of whatsoever disease he had,' are omitted by many ancient authorities and are probably to be regarded as an explanatory gloss which was taken over from a marginal note into the regular text. And along with this may be mentioned the paragraph John vii. 53-viii. 11—the story of the woman taken in adultery—

which, while undoubtedly embodying a true tradition, does not belong to the original text of St. John's Gospel, but was placed there for purposes of preservation. And so again, the Doxology attached to the Lord's Prayer in Matt. vi. 13, 'For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen,' is wanting in our best Greek manuscripts, and was doubtless added at a later date on liturgical grounds to convey the people's response to the Prayer.

Greater difficulty is caused by dogmatic changes, though it may be questioned whether these are really as numerous as is sometimes made out. Two may be noted. One is Acts xx. 28, where many ancient authorities read 'to feed the Church of the Lord' (not of 'God') in view of the words that follow 'which He hath purchased with His own blood'; the other is 1 Tim. iii. 16, where, in the supposed interest of the Divinity of our Lord, 'God' takes the place of 'He who.'

It is not necessary to go on quoting. Let any reader just think of the different kinds of mistakes into which he would most readily fall when copying a document of any considerable length, and he will understand the dangers which beset the New Testament scribes. So far, too, from these dangers being of late growth,

as was at one time thought, they make their appearance from a very early date.

Number of Variants.

As to the actual *number of variants* in the early ages of the Church, we have naturally no exact data, but in John Mill's Greek Testament published in 1707, of which we shall hear again (see p. 107), the variants have been estimated at 30,000, and this number has been enormously increased in recent years, perhaps to 150,000 or even more. It is not to be wondered at that the mere mention of such figures has caused deep anxiety in many minds, and has led to the belief that the New Testament text is in a very corrupt state. But we must keep steadily in view that the great mass of these variants are of a very trivial character and in no way affect the general sense, and further, that if the variants are many, the means for judging amongst them are exceptionally numerous and convincing. So numerous and convincing that, according to our great English critics, Bishop Westcott and Professor Hort, 'if comparative trivialities, such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like, are set aside, the words in our opinion still subject to doubt

can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament.'¹

Need of Enquiry.

Why then, someone may say, concern ourselves about the matter at all? The answer surely is easy. In the case of an ordinary book this or that reading may not matter much. But in the case of the New Testament, with its far-reaching and authoritative claims, no effort can be too great to ensure that we possess its message as nearly as possible in the very words of the original writers, recognizing with Origen, the first great Biblical critic, that 'there is not one jot or tittle written in Scripture, which does not work its own work for those who know how to use the form of the words which have been written.'

¹ See *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, small edition, p. 565.