

Acts 8.37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all
thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I
believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God

Article No. 32

For nearly one hundred years the "science" of textual criticism of the New Testament has been powerfully influenced by the theories of Westcott and Hort, whose reconstruction of the Greek text was largely followed by the 1881 Revisers. In the "Notes on Select Readings" appended to their Introduction to the New Testament in the original Greek, they state their reasons for rejecting Acts 8.37 as a spurious addition to the text, as follows:

"This interpolation, which filled up the apparent chasm left by the unanswered question of verse 36 with matter doubtless derived from common Christian practice, stands on the same footing as the other Western amplifications in the Acts. Though not contained in the Greek manuscript chiefly used by Erasmus, and found by him only in the margin of another, he inserted it as "having been omitted by the carelessness of scribes": it is absent from the best manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate, as well as from the Syriac Vulgate and the Egyptian versions; but it soon found its way from the Old Latin into the late text of the Vulgate, with which alone Erasmus was conversant. From his editions it passed into the 'Received Text', though it forms no part of the Syrian Text".

This paragraph gives in summary form the main features of the case against the genuineness of this passage. Most critical editors have adopted this view and as a result the verse is dropped, often without a marginal note, from the modern versions.

There are several points in Westcott and Hort's note which may need some explanation:

"Western Amplifications" W. and H. were convinced that the 4th Century Greek Codex B (Vaticanus) represented the New Testament Text in its purest form. In many hundreds of places this document does not contain the full text exhibited by the so called Textus Receptus. There are good reasons for believing that

Codex B, though ancient, is one of the most defective of all the N.T. manuscripts, and it abounds in omissions, transpositions and other transcriptional blunders. Nevertheless, in the opinion of W. and H. this abbreviated text is the purest, and they termed it the NEUTRAL TEXT. Its distinctive variants exhibit evidence of a doctrinal bias resulting in the presentation in a weaker form of some of the great declarations concerning the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Westcott and Hort distinguished their "neutral" text, represented by Codex Vaticanus (B), from the documents which represent the "Alexandrian" and "Western" texts. Although Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus and Codex Bezae (Aleph, A, D) often disagree with the "Received Text", they also often disagree with each other, and with Codex Vaticanus, but they often contain what the latter omits. In such instances Westcott and Hort assume B to be "neutral, purest, best etc.," and the additional words and phrases in the "Received Text", even when supported by one or more of the other ancient documents, are dismissed as "interpolations", and in the present case as a "Western amplification" of the text characteristic of D and the Old Latin.

The "Syrian" Text. Westcott & Hort, having convinced themselves of the superlative merits of Codex Vaticanus, regarded the great mass of documents represented by the "Received Text" as the fruit of a 4th Century editorial revision undertaken in Syria in the time of Chrysostom. It therefore became fashionable for textual critics to describe the form of the Greek text underlying our Authorised Version as "Syrian" or even "Chrysostomian". As this form of the text was widely used in the Greek Church in the Byzantine period, it is also known as the "Byzantine Text". Where this "Received Text" is fuller than that of the so-called "Neutral text" many scholars tend to dismiss the fuller reading as "Western", "Syrian", "Byzantine", etc.

The "Best MSS of the Latin Vulgate" When Westcott and Hort and other critical editors use the expression "best MSS" they mean, of course, those documents which agree most closely with

the chief representative of their hypothetically "neutral" text - Vaticanus. If their high opinion of this document is not warranted by the facts, then any classification of other documents in relation to this defective standard must be reappraised. Some of the critics' "best" MSS may therefore be among the least reliable.

"Common Christian Practice"

The disputed passage in Acts 8.37 is said by Westcott and Hort to be derived from common Christian practice. By this they mean that it was apparently the custom to require a new convert to make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ before being baptized. It is suggested that an early copyist inserted in the margin of his copy a reference to this practice, and possibly the precise liturgical form in which the baptized person was required to make his profession. It is assumed that a later copyist regarded the marginal note as part of the inspired text and included it in the body of the text in his new copy.

It should be remembered that the "rules" of textual criticism have been made by the critics themselves and that they have often been very arbitrarily applied. One of the "rules" is that the shorter reading is more likely to be correct than the longer. It is apparently assumed that the temptation to embellish is stronger than the tendency to abbreviate. This assumption does not sufficiently allow for the unintentional omissions likely to be made by a tired, aged, short-sighted, uninterested, ignorant, or inefficient copyist. Anyone today making a copy of a long document would find it easy to omit occasional words and sentences, possibly whole pages, but it requires a conscious effort to fabricate absolutely new material. The process of copying lends itself more easily to omission than invention.

J.A. Alexander (1857) is quoted by Dr. E.F. Hills (King James Version Defended - A Christian View of the Manuscripts) in support of the genuineness of Acts 8.37. "It may be argued that the verse, though genuine, was afterwards omitted as unfriendly to the practice

of delaying baptism, which had become common, if not prevalent, before the end of the third century". As early as the first part of the second century there was a widespread belief that forgiveness was hardly possible for serious sins committed after baptism. According to Dr. Hills, Hermas (A.D. 115-140) and Tertullian (c.200) taught that repentance for sin after baptism was only possible once. Tertullian and others who held this view advocated the postponement of baptism until the character of the recipient had been so fully formed that post-baptismal sin could be considered virtually impossible. The baptism of the Ethiopian immediately upon his profession of faith might well have offended those who held this view. They could hardly omit the whole passage, but they could weaken its force by omitting that sentence in which Philip, as an apparent prerequisite to immediate baptism, appears to ask an almost formal question, to evoke an almost formal declaration of belief in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such an omission would have been widely accepted throughout the Church and could thus have influenced the prototypes of the majority of the manuscripts now available to Biblical scholars. It may therefore be argued that "common Christian practice" could well account for the omission of this verse from so many of the manuscripts. The verse is quoted by a second century writer so it is evident that there were copies containing the disputed verse long before later generations of copyists produced the documents now classified as "neutral", "western", and "Byzantine".

Authorities for retaining Acts 8.37 in approximate date order

| | | | |
|---------------------|-------|-------------------------|-----|
| 1. Irenaeus | 2nd c | 9. Armenian version | 5 c |
| 2. Tertullian | 2-3 c | 10. Codex D?(defective) | 5 c |
| 3. Cyprian | 258 | 11. Old Latin e | 6 c |
| 4. Pacian | 4 c | (Codex Laudianus) | |
| 5. Ambrose | 397 | 12. OEcumenius | 6 c |
| 6. Ambrosiaster | 4 c | 13. Old Latin | 6 c |
| 7. Augustine | 430 | 14. Syriac (Harkel) | 616 |
| 8. Georgian version | 5 c | 15. Old Latin l | 7 c |

| | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|--------|-----|------------------------------------|--------|
| 16. | Old Latin r | 7-8c | 37. | Cursive 105 | 12 c |
| 17. | Uncial E | 8 c | 38. | " 97 | 12 c |
| 18. | Old Latin m | 8-9c | 39. | " 88 ^c | 12 c |
| 19. | " " ar (Codex Ardmachanus) | 9 c | 40. | Old Lat. ph. (Philadelphiensis) | 12 c |
| 20. | Arabic version | 8-14c | 41. | Lectionary 59 | 12 c |
| 21. | Slavonic " | 9 c | 42. | Cursive 5 | 12 c |
| 22. | Old Latin g (Sangermanensis) | 9 c | 43. | Old Latin gig. (Codex Gigas) | 13 c |
| 23. | Cursive 1739 | 10 c | 44. | Cursive 36 | 13 c |
| 24. | Cursive 107 | 10 c | 45. | " 69 | 13 c |
| 25. | " 103 | 11 c | 46. | " 1877 | 14 c |
| 26. | Theophylact | 1077 | 47. | " 629 | 14 c |
| 27. | Cursive 945 | 11 c | 48. | " 429 | 14-15c |
| 28. | " 13 | 11 c | 49. | " 630 | 14 c |
| 29. | " 15 | 11 c | 50. | " 4 marg. (Used by Erasmus) | 15 c |
| 30. | " 18 | 11 c | 51. | " 27 | 15 c |
| 31. | " 100 | 11 c | 52. | " 60 | 1407 |
| 32. | " 106 | 11 c | 53. | " 322 | 15 c |
| 33. | " 14 | 11 c | 54. | Latin A ^c | 7-8 c |
| 34. | " 25 | 1087 | 55. | " V (Vallicellanus) | 9 c |
| 35. | " 29 | 11-12c | 56. | Latin Sixtus | 16 c |
| 36. | " 323 | 11-12c | 57. | " Clement | 16 c |

It is therefore evident that, although the majority of the documents now available to Biblical scholars omit this verse, there were very ancient copies which contained it and passed it on through many generations of copyists until it was adopted by the editors of the first printed Greek texts from which our Authorised Version is derived.

It may be argued that the favourable evidence is slender, but it is interesting to note how modern textual critics have sometimes based their theories on far less evidence. An example will be seen in the

Greek N.T. text translated in the New English Bible, edited with textual notes by Dr. R.G.V. Tasker.

See note on John 1.18 "In spite of the strong advocacy by Westcott and Hort of the reading 'God only-begotten' found in Aleph B C L Syr. (Peshito and Harkel marg.) Coptic-Bohairic, mainly because it is the more difficult reading, the (N.E.B.) translators considered that it does not yield a tolerable sense. They regarded the variant 'the only-begotten Son', found in A W Θ fam. 1, fam. 13, most late Greek MSS, the Latin versions, Syriac (Curetonian) and Coptic (Sahidic), as intrinsically more probable. It was thought possible that the second alternative reading quoted, "the only-begotten", though it is represented only in a single MS of the Latin Vulgate might have given rise to the other two. All three readings have patristic support, varying, it would seem, with the Christological emphasis of the particular writer."

The N.E.B. translators rejected the evidence of the chief representatives of the "Neutral" group of documents because they did not yield "a tolerable sense". They accepted the evidence of the group which includes "most late Greek MSS" on the ground of "intrinsic probability". They expressed the view that the original text was most accurately represented by a single Latin MS, and that underlying that Latin document there must have been very ancient Greek documents now no longer available to us. These ancient Greek copies, in the course of later transcription, are assumed to have yielded both of the alternative readings found in the extant manuscripts.

While we do not pretend to regard the N.E.B. as a reliable guide, we may quote it as illustrating the subjective element in textual criticism. In the light of this very recent exercise in critical scholarship we examine again the evidence for Acts 8.37, and reject the chief representatives of the "Neutral" and "Western" groups, because they do not yield a tolerable sense. The Ethiopian asked a question in verse 36 and he would expect an answer. We therefore expect an answer, but seek the answer in

vain in the modern versions and the Greek on which they are based. The "tolerable sense" is found in the A.V., which preserves the Ethiopian's question and Philip's reply. The "intrinsic probability" is certainly with the longer form of this passage, although it is attested by later authorities.

Again, we glance at the Latin versions and find Acts. 8.37 supported not merely by "a single MS of the Latin Vulgate", but by many of the Vulgate and of the Old Latin. These Latin versions are by no means uniformly reliable, but they have a contribution to make to the evidence. For instance, if in the 4th Century Jerome included in his Latin translation a text now disputed, we would at least have ground for believing that the disputed text was to be found in some Greek copies at that time. Some of those Greek copies would have been transcribed from far older copies which are now lost and are only represented by their transcriptional descendants in Latin or some other language.

In conclusion, while this verse is not acknowledged as "Neutral", "Western" or "Byzantine", there is internal and external evidence in favour of retaining it as part of the "Divine Original".

A list of articles on the text and translations of the Holy Scriptures will be sent on request.

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