

Book Review

Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Is History, Methods, and Results* (InterVarsity Press, 2006): 334 pp.

Wegner is professor of Old Testament at Phoenix Seminary in Phoenix, Arizona. This volume is a helpful, scholarly introduction to the current state of academic textual criticism from an evangelical perspective. It is also unique in that it combines an introduction to textual study of both the Old and New Testaments in one convenient volume. Wegner's commitment to "reasoned eclecticism" (p. 221), however, raises some foundational questions about the approach not only of this book but of the practice of textual criticism among evangelical scholars.

Summary

The content of the book is divided into four parts:

Part I is "Introductory Material" (pp. 21-86). Wegner begins by defining textual criticism as "*the science and the art that seeks to determine the most reliable wording of a text*" (p. 24). The goal of Old Testament text criticism is "to determine the final, authoritative form, which was then maintained by the scribes and was later recorded in the canon" (p. 37). The goal of New Testament text criticism is "to determine the most plausible original reading out of a larger body of evidence" (p. 41). Wegner reviews various transmissional errors reflecting both unintentional changes (e.g., haplography, dittography, etc.) and intentional changes. Finally, he provides an overview of the transmission of the text of Scripture distinguishing between the way in which the Old Testament was transmitted by careful scribes over a long period of time, whereas the New Testament "often lacked much of the care and precision that the Old Testament received" largely due to persecution of the early church (p. 79).

Part II is "Old Testament Textual Criticism" (pp. 87-204). Wegner begins with the observation that "Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest, extant Hebrew manuscripts of any significant portion of the Old Testament was from the ninth century A. D." (p. 89). Despite the Dead Sea Scrolls giving evidence of various textual traditions in the Hebrew Bible, "Most scholars today have abandoned any attempt to develop an eclectic Hebrew text (combining the best readings from each Hebrew manuscripts, similar to the United Bible Society's text of the New Testament)" (p. 103). Old Testament textual critics have "considered it preferable to choose a particular extant manuscript of the Old Testament (*a textus receptus*) and add a textual apparatus, noting where the text differs from other readings. The assumption is that it is better to produce a known form of the Old Testament than to attempt a hypothetical eclectic text that may have never existed" (p. 104).

He proceeds to offer a helpful summary of the various modern diplomatic editions of the Hebrew Bible, including the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* used by most college and seminary students. Wegner's explanation of the BHS apparatus is particularly useful for

students. Another beneficial feature of this section is a clear explanation of the various sources for Old Testament criticism (from the silver amulets to various manuscripts and modern printed editions).

Part III is “New Testament Textual Criticism” (pp. 205-266). Wegner begins by tracing textual criticism from the Church Fathers, to the Vulgate, to the printed editions of the *Textus Receptus* in the Reformation era, to the overthrow of the traditional text in modern critical editions of the Greek text. Whereas Old Testament scholars prefer a diplomatic text, New Testament scholars have come to prefer an eclectic text.

Wegner also provides a useful explanation of the apparatus found in modern editions of the Greek text (Nestle-Aland a UBS) used by students. He also offers biographical sketches of key figures in text critical scholarship (from Jerome to Erasmus to Westcott and Hort) and various sources in New Testament criticism (from early papyri to the famous uncials Sinaiticus and Vaticanus).

Finally, Part IV is “Additional Ancient Versions for Old Testament and New Testament Textual Criticism” (pp. 267-301). This concluding section offer a summary of the various ancient versions of the Biblical text (e.g., Syriac, Latin, etc.). The book ends with Wegner’s conclusion that textual criticism is “crucial” to establishing “the reliability of the text” (pp. 298, 301).

Evaluation and Reflection

This work is a helpful introduction to the history, sources, methods, and practice of textual criticism of the Bible (Old and New Testaments). Wegner has made many technical issues clear and understandable. There is some repetition (e.g., explaining the same concept, scholar, or manuscripts in both the Old Testament and New Testament sections), but this causes no great distraction. The book is also filled with many useful illustrations, graphs, and photographs.

There are two foundational problems, however, that emerge from the book.

The first relates to Wegner’s definition of text criticism as “science” and “art” (p. 24). Another key consideration is omitted in this definition, namely textual criticism as theology or doctrine. Indeed, this is a key element missing in the entire study. There is no sustained presentation of how one’s doctrine of Scripture affects one’s view of the text of Scripture. There is no discussion of the doctrine of the preservation of Scripture and how this impacts one’s view of the transmission of the text. Nor is there discussion of issues touching this topic like inerrancy, infallibility, sufficiency, and canonicity.

Along these lines, there is little discussion of the role of the church in determining the text of Scripture, aside from a brief section near the end titled “When Should I Use Textual Criticism?” (p. 254). Here Wegner asks if textual matter should be addressed from the pulpit or in the Sunday School class: “Is the modern church able to deal with this issue?” (p. 254). He advises: “It is best to keep the discussion short and to the point,

dealing carefully with the issues so as not to undermine people's belief in the Bible, or even the translation they are used to" (p. 254). He also proceeds to offer his pious readers this reassurance that has been around since the days of Bengel: "It is crucial to remind people that most variants are insignificant and that no doctrine hinges on a variant text" (p. 254). The question remains however, if such a dismissal of doctrinal concern in textual matters is appropriate. Does it not have ramifications for the understanding of the canon and nature of Scripture? From Wegner's perspective, one might think that the determination of the proper text of Scripture is a purely a-theological venture in the domain of the academics and not faithful churchmen.

The second foundational issue relates to Wegner's understanding of the goal of textual criticism. He opens this book by saying that students often ask, "Is the Bible we have today accurate?" (p. 19). A few pages later he writes: "The job of the textual critic is very similar to that of a detective searching for clues as to the original reading of the text" (p. 23). He also describes it as "the process of searching through the various sources of the biblical texts to determine the most accurate or reliable reading of a particular passage" (p. 24). Later he adds: "Since no autographs are available today of either the Old or New Testaments, the general task of the text critic is to get back as close as possible to those autographs" (p. 29). Indeed, Wegner sees the role of the text critic as restoration of the lost "original reading of the text" (the autograph) through the "science" and "art" (but not theology) of text criticism.

In this approach, Wegner reflects the typical view of the evangelical scholar who has embraced the perspective of modern academic study of Biblical texts. These follow, whether wittingly or unwittingly, in the train of Westcott and Hort who had the audacity to title their influential 1881 edition of the Greek New Testament *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. Wegner himself makes the point that Kurt and Barbara Aland consider their eclectic text of the New Testament as "the original text" and have thus opened themselves to the charge of "circular reasoning" when they reject competing readings as secondary to their own (p. 220). The problem with the evangelical embrace of this view (often in the name of finding the inerrant original autographs, something Wegner, however, does not do) is that is now considered outdated in the academy. The evangelical view of the text criticism is, in fact, in line with the 19th and 20th century academy and not the 21st century academy. As Wegner points out, cutting edge textual criticism, reflected in the writings of men like Bart Ehrman and David Parker, has abandoned any notion of finding an authoritative original text.

On one hand, Wegner acknowledges the reality of this shift. In his discussion of the goal of Old Testament criticism, for example, he states: "It was once thought possible to recover the *ipsissima verba* ("the actual words") of the inspired writer and that these were the original autographs of Scripture. However, today most scholars recognize that it is impossible to trace the formation of any of the Old Testament books and that most have undergone later modifications" (pp. 29-30). Turning to the New Testament, he acknowledges that "the traditional goal of New Testament textual criticism to recover the text of the autographs has been questioned significantly by recent scholars" (p. 37).

Indeed, the most influential modern text scholars argue that scripture(s) should not be viewed as “a fixed text” but as a “moving stream” or “living text” (p. 39).

Nevertheless, Wegner remains committed to the old school search for the original text: “A plausible goal for New Testament textual criticism is the recovery of the original readings of the text or in some cases it may be necessary to identify the earliest possible readings” (p. 39). The same old problem emerges for those who make this their aim, however. Although, they feel they can offer a near approximation of the original reading, they cannot do so with absolute certainty. There is a marked crisis of confidence in knowing what the text of Scripture actually is. We see this in comments Wegner makes like these (emphasis added to highlight the constant reminders of uncertainty):

While questions as to the original text surface in some places, a substantial amount of the New Testament text remains unquestioned and **most likely represents the original autographs or very close to it** (p. 39).

It may not always be possible to know for certain that we have an original reading, but remember there is only about 6 percent of the Greek text that is in question (p. 39).

Therefore the goal of New Testament textual criticism is **to determine the most plausible original reading out of a large body of evidence** (p. 41).

Careful examination of these manuscripts has served to strengthen our assurance that **our modern Greek and Hebrew critical texts are very close to the original autographs, even though we do not have those autographs** (p. 301).

With statements such as these, we must conclude that Wegner would answer his students who ask, “How accurate is the biblical text?” without absolute certainty. The best he and other evangelical text critics who have embraced this view might answer is that we might well have a close approximation of the original text of Scripture in the modern critical texts, but we cannot be absolutely certain. Will this response offer the student assurance concerning the reliability and authority of Scripture or alarm? What if, instead of the nebulous answer of the evangelical text critic, the student received this response: “Yes, God has faithfully preserved his word in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament and the received text of the New Testament, as they have been faithfully used by the church from ancient times.”

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