

**SOME COMMENTS UPON  
REUBEN J. SWANSON'S PROPOSALS  
CONCERNING THE PURPOSE OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM**

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In the recent publication of *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Romans*,<sup>1</sup> by Reuben J. Swanson, we find on page xxvii, an interesting proclamation by Dr. Swanson:

To believe that we can reconstruct out of fragmentary and late material " *the original pure text*" is thus a delusion...the role of the critic is to present the material from the manuscripts *in toto*...

and again on page xxviii, he further adds:

It is by far more critical in principle to report all of the evidence, rather than to make subjective and arbitrary judgments as to what is important and what is not in the search for an *original pure text*.

Hence, Dr. Swanson is making a new and sweeping proposal which completely redirects the science of textual criticism—especially as applied to the Biblical texts. I wish to consider his proposal(s) in this note.

Let it be noted, however, that Reuben also suggests that the greater result from the above proposal would be to illuminate the progress, or "the internal history of the Christian community from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries". This can be accomplished by a full and accurate recording of the manuscripts and the variants in the same, and then examining these variations. This is what Reuben suggests as the ultimate goal of [Biblical] criticism.<sup>2</sup> I shall not comment upon this aspect, other than to say that this "ultimate goal" is really just an additional feature which can result from a thorough citing of the variants—as such it should not be seen as a "new" goal.

Worthy, rather, of elucidation is his proposal of not seeking to establish an original text, but instead to accurately and fully present the variants in the surviving witnesses. There are some real benefits from this suggestion. Like Reuben, most textual critics rely upon empirical evidence, the actual manuscripts and their readings.

This data can only take us back to the second century A.D., and the data from the second century is very scanty, it is much fuller in the fourth century A.D. The original texts were written circa A.D. 50—A.D. 98. We thus have a gap of about 250 years in which many variations had crept into the copies. (We do have a few tiny fragments from circa A.D. 125).<sup>3</sup> Rationalists throw up their hands in despair after years of attempting to remove this 250 year gap and postulate a sound original text. The pure, stand-alone science of textual criticism cannot extract the original readings, it fails miserably. Reuben and I agree here. Reuben's work, itself, demonstrates minute variants on a manuscript by manuscript basis, and each manuscript reflects a certain era and possible theological context.

Yet, all of the data has not been presented. Our numerous Greek New Testament handbooks are just that, handbooks, with a selection of a few variants shown. Tischendorf's work from the 1870s has still the single most complete apparatus yet. There are projects which have presented large amounts of data, but only for small portions of the New Testament text (such as for the book of Luke, *et al*). Dr. Swanson has advanced our knowledge with his work on the four gospels, Acts, Galatians and Romans. He has especially added to our databases of variants in the works which he has edited since his earliest works (the four gospels) which uses only about 45 manuscripts, whereas Romans uses about 85 manuscripts.

So indeed! the reporting of *all* of the known variants from the surviving manuscripts is a major desideratum. It has not yet been done. Until this is done, critics need to use caution when attempting to produce an original text! Mention needs to be made that minor variants such as some aural types and itacisms need not be shown; but certainly all semantically meaningful word changes, tense changes, omissions and additions, person, number and gender changes [and numerous other types] need to be accurately recorded. We have about 3,300 surviving pre-printing era Greek New Testament manuscripts in fragmentary and complete formats.<sup>4</sup> These have not yet all been recorded. Some scholars have scanned many of these manuscripts, and have extracted a small sampling of variants from each, but this is a far cry from a comprehensive reporting of all of the data as Reuben proposes.

One of Tischendorf's strong qualities, was his accuracy. In Reuben's recent work on Romans there exists several hundred errors (this estimate is based upon his work on Acts). Thousands (!) of errors exist in the UBS and Nestle handbook editions as well.<sup>5</sup> So not only is a full reporting of all the variants needed, they need to be correctly and accurately recorded. Old collations need to be corrected and new databases generated. A fine and sharp accuracy has not yet been accomplished outside of Tregelle's and Tischendorf's efforts from the late 1800s. With so many scholars blowing their trumpets, one can only see this lack as a crime without excuse.

These are realistic goals for textual critics. In reporting the data they must make critical assessments as to what each ligature, and what each mark of ink means. They must examine difficult-to-read texts under a variety of lighting assists (infrared, ultraviolet, multi-spectral imaging, *et al*); they should resolve and recognize simple spelling errors, they should report all orthographic variations. They should report changes in scribal hands, changes in inks, erasures, all annotations, all diacritical marks, all colophons, changes in the formats and styles of each fragment or manuscript. Changes in the number of letters on or below the line of text, changes in writing materials, changes in incipits, titloi and lectionary apparatuses should be thoroughly noted. Ornamentation types, icons, images, colors and scribbles should be observed and noted. Attention to dialectical variations (Attic, Ionic, Aeolic, *etcetera*) should be discerned. Alterations in quotations from the Old Testament (LXX) should be recorded, as well as unusual words, aberrations and all other relevant phenomena. Thus, the true textual critic has an immense task lying before him or her! Much work remains to be done, and we have not yet mentioned the thousands upon thousands of ancient versional manuscripts which exist (Coptic, Latin, Armenian, Ethiopic, Syriac and others).<sup>6</sup> A formidable task, and one which *needs* to be done. This is real roll-your-sleeves-up work, nuts-and-bolts stuff, tiring work, perhaps this is why so many would-be critics resort to intellectual escapes, formulations and fanciful theories. It is high time that we get to work. A lack of grants and monies for support are not the reasons for lack of research, it is individual laziness and or a lack of genuine concern! I also feel that many institutions do not properly train young critics, often they are led into fields of pseudo-intellectualism, full of theories and vanities. (Proverbs 19:21).

Finally, another reason why **some** textual critics should *not* try to extract the original text is that God's Word is a unique book. It demands and requires that a unique faith be applied to it, otherwise it cannot be truly understood. A mature, elected saint, with a sound theology, serves as the foundation for true effective criticism. Many, nay, most current textual critics rely upon rationalism (as does Reuben) in order to reconstruct any original texts of the New Testament. Hence, without the necessary faith, they are doomed to failure. Instead they may usefully serve if they can accurately and fully record the existing data, and this would be a remarkable and useful service. Only the faithful believers, with the indwelling Holy Spirit are enabled to begin to understand the Word from God.<sup>7</sup> This same understanding assists them in deciding which variant is genuine! It is true that no two saints will produce duplicate results, as the written Word is a part of each believer's stage of maturity. A young naïve saint, will not understand why the word "God" in this sample is not genuine:

...so they took the body of *God* and bound it in linen-cloths... John 19:40

This is what codex Alexandrinus reads here, all other witnesses in Greek read "Jesus" (at least as far as we presently know!). A well trained critic would probably know that this reading of "God" reflects a monophysite reading, it is an intentional change! Mature saints, who are also gifted critics should also know this.

More poignantly, a trained believer, and one who is moved by God to do this type of research, has an *intuitive* (horrors! cry the rationalists!) sense lacking in pagan critics. Believers have a special symbiotic relationship with God's Word, just as the Holy Spirit has a special relationship with the written Word.<sup>8</sup> Each believer **can** determine the actual original text for them at a specific time in their lives! This text may grow as they grow, and this is a unique and mysterious aspect connected with this Holy Writ. This method and reliance upon the indwelling Holy Spirit is not quantifiable, it is not easily validated with empirical proofs, it is too subjective declare the rationalists. Subjecting the written Word to a sound Bible-based mature

theology via a gifted saint is a fine complement to the labors of the many non-believing textual critics. It adds an incomprehensible component, one which the rationalists cannot ever understand until they come to terms with the Divine Author of the Bible; not on their terms, but rather on His terms, they must be chosen and they must believe the whole of the Old and New Testaments! God keeps His Word alive and well, scattered in hundreds of manuscripts, and within each believing critic lies the key for reconstruction.

Let the rationalists present the variants, and let the believers do the actual reconstructing! In this manner both may find some mutual satisfaction, and in this manner a portion of Swanson's proposal, concerning the showing of the variants *in toto*, is recognized as an urgent need and a valid purpose for those doing textual criticism.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Swanson, Reuben J.. *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Romans*. Carol Stream, Illinois. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Also, William Carey International University Press of Pasadena, CA.. 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Using the results of textual criticism as an aid to study church history is not a new proposal via Reuben, it has been actively pursued for some time. However, making it *the* goal of NT textual criticism is the centerpiece of Reuben's proposal. A more nuanced view is offered by Bart D. Ehrman in his essay titled: "The Text as Window: New Testament Manuscripts and the Social History of Early Christianity" seen in *Studies and Documents*, volume 46, *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995. Herein Bart recognizes the value of traditional textual criticism without suggesting that its primary goal is exposing the progression of church history or doctrines.

<sup>3</sup> Not only have we a few small fragments from the early second century such as P<sup>52</sup> and P<sup>64</sup>, but we do have some rather substantial material in P<sup>46</sup>, (circa A.D. 200) which contains a large portion of the Pauline epistles. In P<sup>46</sup> we see numerous readings (variants) which differ from typical texts in Egypt, suggesting an earlier independent text or original!

<sup>4</sup> This number does not include the lectionaries.

<sup>5</sup> I began a website listing the errata seen in Reuben's works, hundreds of errors have been shown, yet this barely reflects the true case. Whenever a MS which Reuben used, is carefully checked against Reuben's work many more errors emerge. For example Klaus Witten of the Institute in Münster, Germany, partially collated minuscule 88 against Reuben's collation in Acts (chapters 1 through 18) in which he found 339 errors! This is unacceptably high. Reuben's work on Galatians and Romans is somewhat better, per my own spot checks.

[The errata list can still be seen at: <http://www.uni-bremen.de/~wie>].

As for the Nestle/Aland editions and the *United Bible Societies* editions, Reuben himself, documents many hundreds of their errors in appendices to his works. I have also counted and examined hundreds of errors in portions of various New Testament books in the UBS and Nestle/Aland editions.

<sup>6</sup> Another important division in the practice of New Testament textual criticism, is that between internal and external evidences. The manuscripts themselves, the early versions and lectionaries provide the bulk of the internal data. It is this type of data which Reuben focuses upon. Unfortunately he does not offer much in the way of external data such as: ruling types, ink types, script analyses, geographic or provincial peculiarities, and other non-textual factors. His greatest omission is however, his failure to recognize that a true critic has the *responsibility* of suggesting an original reading. In Reuben's work, of course, this is not required as he is just showing some of the variants. It is this traditional aspect of textual criticism which Reuben wishes to remove! as seen in his introductory material, in which he makes these rather wild proposals.

<sup>7</sup> This is seen in these quotes:

"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth..." John 16:13a (NASB)

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." Colossians 2:8 (NASB)

"Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." II Timothy 1:13 (NASB)

<sup>8</sup> Recall Hebrews 4:12, "...for the Word of God is living and active...", it lives, it is not static nor dead. As such it grows with each believer, yet its original form does *not* change. Rather amazing!

It is the Holy Spirit which vivifies the written Word, this vivification can only occur in the hearts of the elect. God's Word is not milk for pagan babes. Sadly, I know that unbelievers cannot accept these basic truths, and they will continue to manipulate the Bible in all sorts of sordid and dark ways. I cannot make the blind see, but I can encourage my brethern!