**INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE**

**Lecture Three**

**Biblical Criticism**

In the next two lectures we turn to examining the texts of the Bible, i.e. the actual

writings themselves, the copies from which we obtain our translations and how we got

them. This includes a look at the ancient manuscripts.

**Criticism**

Mention the word criticism and people immediately imagine that you mean destructive and negative comments. Yet that is not the true meaning of the word. For example, to produce a critical review of a play, the article would include constructive comments on the work, in other words, it would be intended to give a fair judgement, appreciation and appraisal of the said work. In relation to Biblical studies, and more specifically in relation This is concerned with discovering as accurately as possible, the exact words and phrases used by the original writers of the various books of the Bible. It involves examining the oldest manuscripts which exist, and by studying variations in text and sifting through all the evidence, scholars seek to determine as accurately as possible

what the original text, as first written down, would have been. The original texts no longer exist, and all the manuscripts we have now, of both the Old and New Testaments, are copies from the originals. However, for various reasons which will be covered fully later, scholars are convinced of the accuracy of the copies. This was confirmed beyond doubt with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a point which will be mentioned in detail later.

On the subject of textual criticism, it is necessary to mention that through the centuries of copying Scriptures, errors in the copying did creep in. Yet because of the vast number of texts and manuscripts available to us, it is relatively easy to spot where copying errors were made.

The most common errors in copying related to the failure to repeat a letter or word; repeating something that only occurred once; omitting a passage between identical words; omitting a line of text; confusion of letters of similar form and insertion into the body of text of marginal notes. Even though copying errors in our ancient texts are comparatively few and far between, it is nevertheless important to say something here of how those errors have been dealt with, i.e. how we have moved closer to the original text. If we consider just the New Testament, the wealth of textual evidence available to us is overwhelming, and far surpasses that of any other ancient literature. The hypocrisy of the situation is that secular scholars will accept as historical truth copies of famous ancient documents while rejecting the historicity of the Bible, meanwhile the Bible is the best attested and authenticated piece of ancient literature in existence.

**Consider the following**

* Homer's "Iliad" (900 BC) - 643 copies; first copy found (400 BC).
* Caesar's "Gallic Wars" (65 BC) - 10 copies; first copy found (900 AD).
* Thucydides "Peloponnesian War" (410 BC) - 8 copies; first found (900 AD).
* Plato's "Tetralogies" (400 BC) - 7 copies; first copy found (900 AD).
* Aristotle's "Works" (350 BC) - 49 copies; first copy found (1100 AD).
* New Testament (40-100 AD) - 5,000 copies in original Greek, first copy found

(125 AD), and some portions dating to 65 AD!! There are also some 19,000

copies and portions in other languages dating as far back as the 2nd, 3rd and

4th centuries AD.

The critical thing to note is the date of writing of the document, the date of

the earliest copies known (thus highlighting the time span or "credibility

gap") and the number of copies available. The contrast is staggering. Josh McDowell notes in his book "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" that the Iliad had undergone a 5% textual corruption (that is, 764 of its 15,600 lines are in doubt) whereas the New Testament has only 40 of its 20,000 lines in question, a figure of half of one per cent. FF. Bruce has said: "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament. "With such a wealth of evidence available, it becomes relatively easy spotting where copying errors have been made. You may have several, if not dozens of copies of one passage, and if one copy throws doubt on a word or line, the many other manuscripts can clear up the confusion. It has also been noted that although many variant readings do exist, none of them affect Christian doctrine, as will be seen later. Scholars have discovered that the vast majority of the variant readings have so little support, and that the remainder are of so little significance, that the textual accuracy of the New Testament as we have it today can be said to be 98.33% pure! The following quotes from the greatest authorities on textual criticism should help to clarify the point further: Schaffer: "We possess so many manuscripts, and we are aided by so many versions, that we are never left to the need of conjecture as the means of removing errata." Sir Frederic Kenyon: "It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world." Gleason Archer: "A careful study of the variants (different readings) of the earliest manuscripts reveals that none of them affects a single doctrine of Scripture. The system of spiritual truth contained in the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament is not in the slightest altered or compromised by any of the variant readings found in the Hebrew manuscripts of earlier date found in the Dead Sea caves or anywhere else. All that is needed to verify this is to check the register of well attested variants in Rudolf Kittel's edition of the Hebrew Bible. It is very evident that the vast majority of them are so inconsequential as to leave the meaning of each clause doctrinally unaffected. "The editors of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible say: "It will be obvious to the careful reader that still in 1946, as in 1881 and 1901, no doctrine of the Christian faith has been affected by the revision, for the simple reason that, out of the thousands of variant readings in the manuscripts, none has turned up thus far that requires a revision of Christian doctrine. "Finally, Sir Frederic Kenyon (again): "It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries (of manuscripts) and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God".

**Higher Criticism**

If textual criticism relates to the actual text of Scripture, higher criticism deals with questions of authorship, date of composition, authenticity etc. This kind of work is of course very valuable in helping us to determine the contexts of books and prophecies and with background knowledge of circumstances. But unfortunately too many people have indulged in this form of criticism with a very negative attitude towards the Bible Scholars have attempted to dissect and analyse God's Word from a secular viewpoint, with little or no regard to the book's supernatural nature, or to its Divine and omnipotent author. For this reason higher criticism has often been suspect in evangelical circles. The problem is that people have looked at the contents of books of the Bible and drawn conclusions without allowing for the Divine hand of God in the matter. Others make rash and insubstantial statements about "composite" authorship of a book on the shaky basis of literary form and suppositions which have not allowed for the supernatural. Thus some will claim that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by many different authors at different periods. This conclusion is based upon such arguments as different literary styles within the book. No account is taken of the fact that different styles are often used for different subject matter. Some will say the book of Daniel was written only a couple of centuries before the birth of Jesus. They say this because they do no accept the incredibly detailed prophecies of the book, and in their minds, the "prophecies" could only have achieved such accuracy if they were written in retrospect. Yet they once again make no allowance for the existence of the all-powerful, omniscient God, the one who knows the end from the beginning and who is well able to reveal such knowledge to His servants. Some of these questions will be dealt with fully in later modules, but let it be said here that when it comes to examining such things as authorship and date of composition, we always look for confirmation within Scripture, such as New Testament quotes from the Old Testament, and never close our minds to the supreme fact God is God, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent and that His Word is truth. He is well able at any time to exceed the bounds of nature and to supersede the limitations of human thought and reason.

**THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS**

The next lecture will deal with the actual texts of the Old and New Testaments, but a word first about the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947 a young Bedouin shepherd searching for a stray goat in the Judean desert, entered a long-untouched cave and found clay jars filled with ancient scrolls. It was some time before they were recognised as genuine, and eventually pronounced by Professor William Albright to be "the most important discovery ever made in Old Testament manuscripts". That initial discovery yielded seven scrolls and began a search that lasted nearly a decade and eventually produced thousands of scrolls and fragments from eleven caves.

During those same years, archaeologists searching for a habitation close to the caves that might help identify the people who deposited the scrolls, excavated the Qumran ruin, a complex of structures located on a barren terrace between the cliffs where the caves are found and the Dead Sea. It was soon established that both the scrolls and the ruin dated from the 3rd century BC to the first century AD. The scrolls turned out to be the remains of a library of Jewish writings which had been preserved by a sect known as the Qumran community. The sect was eventually destroyed by the Romans, but not before they had managed to hide their scrolls in the nearby caves. Until the discovery of that Qumran library, the earliest known Hebrew manuscripts of any part of the Old Testament dated back to only the 9th century AD. The Qumran scrolls preceded that by 1000 years! In fact portions from every book of the Old Testament except Esther were found, and one complete scroll of the book of Isaiah. Arguments concerning the Qumran community itself and some of their own writings about the 1st Century BC will no doubt be the subject of heated debate for years to come. But for us, one outstanding consequence of this incredible discovery remains untouched and of the greatest significance. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest known copies of the Old Testament dated back to the 9th century AD, in other words, about a thousand years ago. The Jews themselves had standardised their Old Testament text in about 500 AD in what is known as the Massoretic Text. The Massoretes were a group of scribes and Pharisees whose lives were dedicated to preserving and perpetuating copies of their Old Testament, and their invaluable contribution will be looked at more closely in the next lecture. But as already mentioned, the earliest copy of the Massoretic Text only went back as far as the 9th century. The big question was how could we be sure that centuries of copying had not completely corrupted the text of the Old Testament? We could compare back over the last thousand years, but what about before that? How could we know that the 9th century copies were still accurate and faithful to the Old Testament text known to Jesus a thousand years before that? The Dead Sea Scrolls provided the amazing answer. In one unique discovery, we suddenly had new copies of the Old Testament going back a further thousand years. They revealed a remarkable level of accuracy. The Massoretic Text of the 9th century contained few negligible and insignificant variations when compared with the more ancient Dead Sea Scrolls. In other words, in over a thousand years of copying, we could see how successful the Massoretes had been in preserving the text. Through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Lord had given wonderful confirmation of the accuracy of our Old Testament text!!