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RICHARD BENTLEY AND THE TEXT OF THE GREEK TESTAMENT

by B. F. HARRIS

RICHARD BENTLEY, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and greatest of that University's classical scholars, was born on January 27, 1662. In view of his work on the text of the Greek New Testament, it is fitting that his memory should be honoured in our pages. Mr. Bruce Harris, who has given us this tercentenary article, is Senior Lecturer in Classics in the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

WHEN tributes are being paid this year, the tercentenary of Bentley's birth, to the immense importance of this scholar for the study of the classics in Europe, it is salutary to remember also his association with the history of the text of the Greek Testament. He formulated a plan for an edition which, had it seen the light of day, would have put this field of study a century ahead of the advance which was actually made. Even in its failure, the project was impressive and fruitful. Jebb has said of Bentley's work on the New Testament: "His ideas were in advance of his age, and also of the means at his disposal for executing them. He gave an initial impulse, of which the effect could not be destroyed by the limitation or defeat of his personal labours."¹ After Bentley, the initiative was lost to Continental scholars, and British leadership was only recovered with the labours of S. P. Tregelles, followed by the great and abiding work of Westcott and Hort. The story has a peculiar interest for classicists, because Bentley was intending, by the use of the same tools of criticism which produced such spectacular results in the restoration of classical texts in Greek and Latin, to pioneer a new path in the New Testament field. In these days, when the scope of textual studies—to say nothing of history and literature—has widened so greatly, it would be very unlikely that a scholar could do major work in both these fields.

In Bentley's generation the Received Text was still treated with excessive veneration, and was not actually replaced in England until the nineteenth century. But events in the scholarly world had been gradually bringing about its decline, ever since the arrival of the Codex Alexandrinus (A) in 1627, readings from which appeared in the footnotes of Walton's Polyglot Bible (New Testament, 1657) together with those from fifteen other MSS. "This is the

¹ R. C. Jebb, *Bentley*, p. 171.

real beginning of the textual criticism of the New Testament.”² Dr. Fell, Dean of Christchurch, used over a hundred MSS. for the apparatus of his edition of 1633 ; but the link with Bentley really begins with the monumental edition of Dr. John Mill of Queen’s College, Oxford, in 1707, with its huge apparatus of about 30,000 variant readings, the result of thirty years’ collating from more MSS. than any previous scholar. Mill’s principles of textual criticism were enunciated in his *Prolegomena*. The volume produced a great stir in the learned world, and it is interesting to find that Isaac Newton, who together with Bentley assured the academic dominance of Trinity College in this era, not only acquired two copies for his library, but assisted Mill in the work of collation. The letters between Mill and Newton have recently appeared in Vol. III of *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*.³ Newton worked on the Complutensian Polyglot, on the Codex Bezae, and on Oriental MSS. to produce for Mill a “Specilegium of Lectons” for which he expresses his profound gratitude. Letter 439 in particular illustrates the minutiae of readings over which the two conferred. (It is worth noting also Bentley’s link with Newton ; when the former lived in London as Royal Librarian Newton was one of that remarkable group—the other members were Evelyn, Wren and Locke—which met weekly at Bentley’s lodgings in St. James’. The correspondence between Bentley and Newton⁴ arose chiefly out of scientific and theological issues following Bentley’s Boyle Lectures on *A confutation of atheism*.)

The appearance of such a mass of textual material in Mill’s apparatus must have been a powerful stimulus for Bentley towards the logical step of producing a new text to replace that of Stephanus. Quite apart from his classical labours, of which the most notable examples during this period were the *Dissertation on Phalaris* (1699) and the edition of Horace (1711), Bentley was no stranger to the minutiae of the text of Scripture. Before he was twenty-four years old he composed a kind of Hexapla of the Old Testament, “a thick volume in quarto, in the first column of which I inserted every word of the Hebrew Bible alphabetically ; and in five other columns, all the various interpretations of those words in the Chaldee, Syriac, Vulgate, Latin, Septuagint, and Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, that occur in the whole Bible.”⁵

² F. G. Kenyon, *Text of the Greek Bible*, p. 158.

³ C.U.P. 1961, Letters 398-9, 403, 405-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Letters 428, 437, 439.

⁵ Quoted in Jebb, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

But there was more than Bentley's native industry and professional interest as a textual critic to draw him into the project. He became involved in a controversy which arose directly out of the publication of Dr. Mill's New Testament. The course of this controversy has been well traced in a recent book of Dr. Adam Fox.⁶ There were two sharply contrasted reactions to the edition. Representative of the apprehensions of the conservatives was Daniel Whitby in his *Examen of Mill's variant readings* (1710)—“I have found much in Mill's Prolegomena which seems quite plainly to render the standard of faith insecure, or at best to give others too good a handle for doubting.”⁷ Unfortunately the critical principles stated by Whitby in his Latin preface, which were designed to discredit the bulk of Mill's new variants, were themselves mostly wrong or distorted. The young rationalist Anthony Collins was typical of the other extreme. He seized the opportunity which now presented itself of exploiting this timidity and disagreement amongst ecclesiastical scholars in his *Discourse of Free Thinking* (1713). He claimed to accept Whitby's critique—as in fact most people had—and in writing on the *Conduct of the Clergy* included a section on “their owning and labouring to prove the text of the Scriptures to be precarious.” Collins' pamphlet produced a veritable rash of publications refuting him, including an ironical attack by Jonathan Swift, but the most able reply came from Bentley with his *Remarks* of 1713, addressed to Francis Hare under the pseudonym “Phileleutherus Lipsiensis.” The best part of this, as Dr. Fox shows by his quotations, was Bentley's defence of Mill's New Testament against both conservative and sceptical attacks. Bentley maintained that so much MSS. evidence was a mark of divine providence, and that the number of variants, insignificant as the majority were, arose from this abundance of material and from the minute scholarship devoted to the sacred text.

We may now look at the period of Bentley's enquiries into the great project, which culminated in his Letter to Archbishop Wake (1716) and finally his *Proposals for printing* (1720).⁸ We have noted above that Bentley was already familiar with the main codices available in England, and in 1716 he was visited by the Swiss scholar J. J. Wetstein, who had for many years been working in this field, and now offered Bentley the use of his collations

⁶ *John Mill and Richard Bentley* (1954), Ch. 8.

⁷ *Vide A. Fox, op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁸ *Vide Bentley's Correspondence*, pp. 503 ff.

from MSS. in Europe. It was the acquisition of such a valuable lieutenant as Wetstein which, more than the urgings of his friends and admirers in England, provided the stimulus for Bentley's Letter to the Primate. In this he details his plan: "I have fallen into a course of studies that led me to peruse many of the oldest MSS. of the Greek Testament, and of the Latin too of St. Jerom, of which there are several in England, a full thousand years old. The result of which has been that I find I am able (what some thought impossible) to give an edition of the Greek Testament exactly as it was in the best exemplars at the time of the Council of Nice: so that there shall not be twenty words, nor even particles, difference . . ."⁹ This self-confidence was typical of Bentley; in the classical world it had been the bane of his enemies, for it had been borne out by the success of his labours. In this case he had become very optimistic following collations of a few of Paul's Epistles, using the Codex Alexandrinus (A), Codex Ephraemi (C—provided from Paris by Wetstein), and the oldest available Vulgate MSS.

The years up to the official *Proposals* of 1720 were full of the activity of what seemed to be a dedicated man. Besides Wetstein, Bentley sent a Trinity colleague John Walker to Europe, and had scholars working for him also at Oxford and Durham. Wetstein and Walker created links with all the leading French Catholic scholars of the day, and made their own collations from over a hundred MSS; the examples of these in the Trinity and Christ-church libraries are eloquent testimony to their powers. Bentley was now in possession of better material than any previous New Testament scholar. The only misfortune was that Wetstein did not have more opportunity to work on the great Codex Vaticanus (B) in Rome; as it was, he had toiled at the rate of two hours to a page. His chief acquisition on Bentley's behalf was the ninth-century Codex Augiensis from the abbey of Reichenau.

Bentley's *Proposals* thus show even more self-confidence than the Letter four years earlier. His work was to be "a Charter, a Magna Carta, to the whole Christian church, to last when all the ancient MSS. here quoted may be lost and extinguished." The method proposed may be summarized as follows: he would recover the text of Jerome (c. A.D. 383) from the oldest Latin MSS., and compare this with the oldest Greek text recoverable from the Codex Alexandrinus and from all the collations done for him; since Jerome had himself worked closely from the Greek, wherever

⁹ A. Fox, cited p. 118.

the Greek agreed with the Latin, there the Greek text of the time of Nicaea (A.D. 325) could be recognized. Two sets of secondary authorities were also to be consulted, the Greek and Latin Fathers of the first five centuries and the other earliest versions, Syriac, Coptic and Ethiopic. Such was the vast project for a new text, which Bentley believed would eliminate four-fifths of Mill's variant readings. His cautious approach to the task is as evident in the *Proposals* as his confidence; he would only alter the Received Text when the MSS. authorities warranted it, and "since in the Sacred Writings there's no place for conjectures or emendations," he would relegate his conjectural criticism to the Prolegomena.¹⁰ To illustrate his work, Bentley included a revised text of the last chapter of Revelation.

Why was this great project never completed? The surviving evidence from Bentley's *Correspondence* is slim, but shows a gradual decline of interest and consequently of achievement. Some weight must be given to the opposition aroused, but Bentley was by now an inveterate controversialist. His most fiery opponent was a former Trinity colleague, Conyers Middleton, who dubbed the project "Bentley's Bubble" (this being the year of the South Sea scheme) in a pamphlet which was followed by others from different hands, some named, some anonymous. Bentley wrote his *Full answer to all the Remarks* at the end of the year in a spirit of passionate contempt. More important probably was the fact that, now nearing sixty years of age, he was finding the sheer complexity of the task beyond him. While it is only partially true that "Bentley's gift did not lie in the minutiae of an apparatus criticus,"¹¹ it must be borne in mind that work of this type would today be pursued by a team of scholars rather than an individual. Dr. Fox points out Bentley's failure to classify MSS. by a numerical system (the foundation of modern nomenclature was laid by Wetstein in his New Testament edition of 1751). There were other handicaps, of course, more serious than this; Bentley was unable to simplify the whole problem by the discovery of groups of families of texts, and thus to compare the characteristic readings of such groups. In his *Remarks* of 1713 he had spoken of the providentially large number of MSS. available, and their geographical spread—in Egyptian, Asian and Western churches—as ruling out any collusion. Had he followed up this grouping, he might have arrived at principles which would have made collaboration easier, and the completion of the edition. It was left to J. A. Bengel of

¹⁰ Quoted by Jebb, p. 161.

¹¹ A. Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

Tübingen in his 1734 edition to postulate two families, Asiatic and African. (This work was carried further by Semler and particularly Griesbach [ed. 1775-7], with the groupings Alexandrian, Western and Constantinopolitan. It was a century before the work of Westcott and Hort superseded this.)

Our best evidence of Bentley's detailed work is twofold. First, the revised text of Rev. 22 which was appended to the *Proposals* of 1720;¹² secondly, the folio copy of the Greek text and Latin Vulgate (published 1623) which Bentley interleaved, and where he recorded the results of his collations. A. A. Ellis has reprinted the text of Galatians from this.¹³ The writer has not had the opportunity to consult this, but it is apparently a cautious revision of both the Greek and Latin, with special attention to citations from the Fathers and to the order of words. It is clear that Bentley's completed text would have anticipated a considerable number of accepted changes, e.g., the excision of 1 John 5: 7 about the three heavenly witnesses. His intention here is shown in the *Correspondence*, as is his apprehension because of the strong attachment of most people to the *textus receptus*. Bentley had the quite dispassionate attitude of the textual critic: "the Fate of that Verse will be a mere Question of Fact."¹⁴ This remark provides a good example of the fundamental principle that "knowledge of documents should precede final judgment upon readings."

By 1726 Bentley was deeply involved in a classical *magnum opus*, his edition of Terence, but that year he received from Rome a collation of the Codex Vaticanus made by Mico and partly checked by Bentley's nephew Thomas. In 1729 a superior collation by Rulotta was sent to him, but the promise of these events was not fulfilled; although Wetstein was still collating for him some years later, Dr. Fox's conjecture is probable, that Bentley was dismayed to find that the readings of B were further from the Latin than A, and would thus have been compelled to start his whole work again on fresh textual principles. Bentley's great reliance on the fifth-century Codex A is in general understandable, but it was unfortunately bolstered by the fact that Jerome in writing his Vulgate used a Greek MS. which chanced to have some striking readings in common with A, so that agreement between the Vulgate and A was not as conclusive as Bentley supposed for the establishment of the fourth-century text of the New Testament. A more comprehensive knowledge of Codex B in Rome would have verified

¹² Reprinted in J. H. Mark, *Life of Bentley*, Ch. 15.

¹³ A. A. Ellis, *Bentleii Critica Sacra*.

¹⁴ *Correspondence*, Letter 200.

this conclusion. Besides this, he could not know that older Latin versions lay behind the Vulgate revision; these became available long after his death. As Jebb pointed out,¹⁵ Bentley's own excesses in conjectural emendation had led him astray here. He had altered Augustine's *Itala versio* to *illa versio* and thus arbitrarily ruled out the existence of an Italian text which Augustine specially commended for its accuracy and lucidity.

In the history of New Testament textual criticism the mantle of Bentley fell upon C. Lachmann, who ushered in a new textual era with his edition of 1831. Here we find another great classical scholar who had the courage to go against opinion and neglect the mass of later MSS. in favour of the early uncials, backed up by the best available authorities for the Western text. Lachmann's second edition of 1842-50, with its full explanation of his method, forms a link between Bentley and Westcott and Hort. His researches also stimulated Tregelles and Tischendorf in their search for more early MSS. authorities.

No doubt, had Bentley succeeded, his edition would have contained much that was very valuable, as well as much that was imperfect. We can well suspect that the caution he promised would have been forsaken occasionally for a bold conjecture. "Noli librariorum solos venerari," he had said in the Preface to his Horace, "sed per te sapere aude." It is to be lamented that the man whose immense learning and critical powers brought a new era in European classical studies did not achieve similar success in the New Testament field. We have tried to show, however, that even in its incompleteness Bentley's work at this point was both fruitful in his own age and prophetic of the future.

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¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 168-9.