

**ESSAY ON THE RIGHT
ESTIMATION OF MANUSCRIPT
EVIDENCE: IN THE TEXT
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649483679

Essay on the Right Estimation of Manuscript Evidence: In the Text of the New Testament by
Thomas Rawson Birks

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BY

THOMAS RAWSON BIRKS, M.A.
KNIGHTBRIDGE PROFESSOR, CAMBRIDGE,
AND HON. CANON OF ELY.

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1878

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PREFACE.

THE present attempt to revise and improve our English Bible is mixed up inseparably with a further question, What is the true original Text of the New Testament, on which any such revision has to be based? It seems unfortunate that this more important question should be raised informally and indirectly in the course of an attempt to improve our English version, instead of being looked upon as a distinct preliminary, which requires to be first settled on definite principles, before the other work can be pursued with full prospect of success.

A vast amount of critical material, both in Manuscripts and Versions of the New Testament, has been amassed by the labour of collators and scholars through the last hundred years. A dozen critical editions have appeared in succession, by no means in full agreement with each other, but with a common tendency to depart rather widely from the Received Text, and to replace it by one which treats the five hundred cursive ~~xxxxxxxx~~

scripts nearly as if they were non-existent, and depends almost entirely on the readings of five or six of the oldest Uncials alone. The changes thus introduced are neither few nor unimportant. The greater part of them are not unlikely to be adopted in the revision now in progress, and then to be commended to the acceptance of the whole Church with the seeming authority of all the eminent names to whom the secondary task has been practically confided.

I have a strong conviction that it is highly inexpedient that so grave a matter as an authoritative decision, which is the true text of the New Testament, should be settled by a side-wind in the course of an attempt to improve our English translation, without any previous discussion of the principles on which the adoption of the new text is to be maintained and enforced. Scholars are by no means unanimous, either in their estimate of the relative weight of different parts of the total evidence, or in the verdicts to which they are led by their varying judgments on this first prerequisite for any sure decision. One critic has followed another in adopting certain rules or methods, as if self-evident, which are at least open to very grave doubt, and in my own opinion demonstrably untrue. Dr Scrivener, inferior to no living scholar in diligence, learning, and soundness of judgment, makes the following remarks on Tischendorf's eighth edition, that "it differs from his seventh in 3369 places, to the scandal of the science of comparative criticism, as well as his own grave discredit for discernment and consistency. The evidence

of codex **N**, supported or even unsupported by one or two other authorities of any description, is with him sufficient to outweigh all other witnesses, whether manuscripts, versions, or ecclesiastical writers." This seems almost to justify the remark of Dean Burgon, that to have found an early uncial codex is every bit as fatal in Biblical Criticism, as in common trials to have taken a gift, and "doth blind the eyes of the wise."

The following pages are an attempt to bring stricter laws and principles of evidence to bear on this great question, the present state of which, I think, is most unsatisfactory. I fully agree with Dean Burgon, that "the hypothesis on which recent recensions of the Text have been for the most part conducted, will on fuller search be seen to be untenable." And I offer some reasons, more definite than have been, so far as I know, ever yet adduced, to justify my entire disbelief in the truth and soundness of the greater part of those changes which have been latterly advocated, as if they were restorations of the true and original text of the sacred oracles of God.

CAMBRIDGE,

December, 1877.

CONTENTS.

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER I. | |
| THE DOCTRINE OF GROUPS AND FAMILIES | 6 |
| CHAPTER II. | |
| ON THE WEIGHT DUE TO ANTIQUITY | 22 |
| CHAPTER III. | |
| ON LATER IMPROVEMENT OF MSS. | 33 |
| CHAPTER IV. | |
| ON INTERNAL EVIDENCE | 41 |
| CHAPTER V. | |
| ON HARMONISTIC CHANGES | 49 |