



A.T. ROBERTSON: EVANGELICAL POPULARIZER OF MODERN TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Updated December 11, 2008 (first published May 18, 2005) (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) -

In the 19th century, Presbyterian scholar Robert Dabney warned against modern textual criticism and observed that evangelicals had adopted textual criticism "from the mint of infidel rationalism" (Dabney, "The Doctrinal Various Readings of the New Testament Greek," *Discussions Evangelical and Theological*, pp. 361; this first appeared in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, April 1871).

That is as true today as it was in Dabney's time. The most influential voices in modern textual criticism are men who do not believe that the Bible is the infallibly inspired Word of God, men such as Bruce Metzger who believes the Pentateuch is a mixture of myth and history, Kurt Aland who believed that even the canon of Scripture is not yet settled, and Carlo Martini who is the retired Roman Catholic Archbishop of Milan and a new age philosopher.

Evangelicals who are recognized authorities in this field are few and far between; and they did not invent the discipline, they borrowed it. Having borrowed modern textual criticism from its rationalist authors, these men become evangelical popularizers of it; they put an evangelical face to it.

One of these is the Baptist A.T. Robertson, author of the influential and much-used *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. The following report examines his role in the field of modern textual criticism.

ARCHIBALD THOMAS (A.T.) ROBERTSON (1863-1934)

1. At Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Robertson was the prize student of his Greek teacher, John Albert Broadus (1827-95).

In 1888 Broadus appointed Robertson assistant professor in Greek and homiletics. In 1895 Robertson was made Professor of New Testament Interpretation and he held this position until his death in 1934. Eventually Robertson married Broadus' daughter, Ella. Robertson authored many books and articles on Biblical Greek and had a vast influence as an evangelical popularizer of modern textual criticism. His three most important works were *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (1914), *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1925), and *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931).

2. Broadus, who influenced Robertson toward the acceptance of modern textual criticism, had himself been influenced by a professor at the University of Virginia as well as by Westcott and Hort and the other members of the English Revised Version committee.

a. Broadus' professor of Greek at the University of Virginia was Gessner Harrison (1807-62), the author of *On Greek Prepositions* (1848). He was a Greek classicist and applied secular principles of textual criticism to the Bible. In 1848, Harrison founded a classical school at Belmont, Virginia, "which had a wide influence throughout the south." "A chapter of incalculable import in the history of the grammar of the Greek New Testament transpired when Gessner Harrison had in his Greek classes in the University of Virginia the young ministerial student John A. Broadus. Harrison was a highly accomplished Greek scholar, and far advanced beyond his own era in understanding and use of the modern linguistic method, as is evidenced by his great work on Greek Prepositions and Cases" (H.E. Dana, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, Introduction, 1927). In November 1850, Broadus married a daughter of Gessner Harrison.

b. The following is from Dr. James Sightler's *Westcott's New Bibles*: "There is a little known story in the Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus, founder of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which can instruct us. This biography was written by Broadus' student, A. T. Robertson, the great Greek scholar, advocate of the critical text, and professor at the seminary. In July 1868, three years after the American Bible Union New Testament had appeared, Broadus wrote an article in the Baptist Quarterly strongly defending the last 12 verses of Mark. Burgon quoted from it freely. On September 3, 1868, Westcott wrote a letter to Broadus thanking him for sending a copy of the article, and said: 'I have read with interest the careful and sound criticism which you have kindly called to my attention..."

with regard to the passage of St. Mark, which you most ably analyze, external evidence leaves no doubt, in my opinion, that it was a very early addition to the gospel and not, I think, by St. Mark...my experience, too, in dealing very minutely with the Greek text leads me to think that such a combination as Aleph, B, k, arm is never wrong.' Robertson comments that 'Doctor Broadus afterward felt more uncertain about these last verses of Mark.' Then in 1870 Broadus went to London, and on Oct. 15 he wrote home: 'On Wednesday at two o'clock I went to Westminster Abbey, at the suggestion of Bishop Ellicott. ... I went to the Deanery (A. P. Stanley is Dean), sent in my card with the luncheon, and his Lordship came out saying that he had asked leave of the committee just to bring me in for the half-hour of luncheon. He introduced me in general at the door, and then various gentlemen came up and shook hands...some of them invited me to visit their cathedrals, others asked about the South. Professor Lightfoot invited me to Cambridge quite cordially. Mr. Westcott is a gentle, lovable-looking man, with a mild, sweet tone, and with a devotional feeling predominating in all his talk. I talked principally with him and Mr. Hort about their forthcoming text of the New Testament, in which I am much interested. Mr. Westcott invited me warmly to Peterborough, where he is Canon.' Unbeknownst to Broadus, the Westcott-Hort text was already in the hands of the revisers. Robertson then commented, 'Bishop Ellicott was all courtesy and kindness to Doctor Broadus and left nothing undone that he could do for his enjoyment.' Political appeal to Broadus through 'the pride of life' eventually had its intended effect. On Oct. 28, 1891, Broadus wrote to G. B. Taylor, 'I beg your pardon for not having acknowledged the receipt of the photo-lithograph of the Codex Vaticanus, which arrived in due time, and which I am at present having my class examine with great interest and profit.' He had moved a great distance, from defending the last twelve verses of Mark to teaching his impressionable students, 'with profit,' the Vatican Codex, which omitted these last twelve verses of Mark along with many others" (Sightler, Westcott's New Bibles).

3. The capitulation to modern textual criticism, which began with Broadus, was carried to fruition by Robertson.

In 1925 he published *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*. It was dedicated to B.B. Warfield, who, in turn, had been influenced by Charles and A.A. Hodge at Princeton. The following quotes from the Introduction reveal Robertson's entire capitulation to Westcott and Hort: "It is today the text that is used by scholars all over the world. These two Cambridge scholars have produced a text that is not final, but that is infinitely superior to all others that preceded it since the first printed Greek New Testament in 1514" (*Introduction to the Textual Criticism*, p. 36).

4. In his teaching at Southern Seminary, A.T. Robertson left out many things that he should have taught.\

I have read his *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* and he did not deal with the following important matters, and many others could be mentioned.

a. A.T. Robertson did not even mention the essential doctrine of the divine preservation of Scripture in the context of his course on modern textual criticism.

b. A.T. Robertson did not introduce his students to the works of the critics of textual criticism, such as Frederick Nolan, John Burgon, Edward Miller, Frederick Scrivener, and Herman Hoskier. He mentions Burgon, Miller, and Scrivener in passing, but only to dismiss their work out of hand. He gives his students no serious overview of the vast number of facts and arguments that these and many other men had marshaled against the critical Greek text.

c. A.T. Robertson did not explain to his students how it would be possible, from a divine perspective, for the apostolic text of the New Testament to become corrupted by the 3rd and 4th century and to be replaced then by a corrupt, man-made, conflated edition that became the standard text of the churches for 1,500 years until the apostolic text was "recovered" through the principles of scientific textual criticism in the 19th century. A.T. Robertson did not explain to his Baptist students how this foundational principle of modern textual criticism could be true from a believing viewpoint and why God would allow the apostolic text to be lost for most of the church age. He never explains, for example, how this theory could be reconciled with Matthew 28:18-20.

d. A.T. Robertson did not give any weight to the fact that textual criticism, so-called "lower criticism," was coming from the same sphere as "higher criticism" and that the most influential names in this field were skeptics. For example, in "An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament," Robertson mentions the following men in a positive light: Johann Griesbach, Westcott and Hort, Caspar Gregory, Frederick Kenyon, Eberhard Nestle, Ezra Abbott, Hermann von Soden, Alexander Souter, Ernest von Dobschutz, Bernhard Weiss, Francis Burkitt, and Kirsopp Lake. He calls such men "heroes of scholarship" (p. 30). He writes as if these men are friends of the truth and does not even hint to his readers that they were skeptics who denied the infallible inspiration of Holy Spirit and other cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith. In my estimation, this is a criminal omission.

e. A.T. Robertson viewed Origen in an almost wholly positive light and did not tell his students that he was a rank heretic who considered Jesus Christ a created being. This omission is the more calamitous because Robertson calls Origen "this greatest ancient biblical scholar" (p. 138) and tells his students that "no scholar has exerted so much influence on the text than he" and admits that Origen had a major role in the Greek text that was preferred by Robertson.

f. A.T. Robertson did not explain to his students how that heresy raged in Egypt in general and in Alexandria in particular during the early centuries following the apostles and that any manuscript from that part of the world and from that time period would naturally be suspect. He mentions the work of heretics in that period but only in passing; he gives this no emphasis whatsoever in regard to his textual theories. In fact, he downplays the possibility of widespread heretical attack upon the manuscripts, calling it "rare" (p. 160). He

takes the strange position, instead, that Received Text readings such as the Ethiopian eunuch's testimony in Acts 8:37 and "God" in 1 Tim. 3:16 and the Trinitarian statement in 1 Jn. 5:7 were introduced by orthodox Christians to defend sound doctrine, thus presenting to his students, as fact and without serious discussion, the amazing phenomena of regenerate, Bible-believing Christians corrupting their own Scriptures! Robertson does mention that Burgon and Miller looked upon the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus "as having "skeptical tendencies," but he dismisses this without documenting their reasons for doing so and without giving it any serious consideration.

g. A.T. Robertson did not explain to his students how the textual principles that he taught (such as conjectural emendation, intrinsic and transcriptional probability) are compatible with God's foundational principle of faith (Rom. 14:23b; Heb. 11:6).

h. A.T. Robertson taught his students the principles of textual criticism as facts (such as the Lucian Recension, Conflation, and the existence of a Neutral text and Western text), without proving that such things are indeed facts.

i. In the 1970s, William Bruner, who studied under Robertson, gave the following testimony to David Otis Fuller. Bruner was a professor of Greek at Bob Jones College from 1949-55 and author of *Children of the Devil* (1966) and *The Truth about Sin* (1977). "On May 12, 1970, you wrote me a very kind letter and sent me some sample materials from your book *Which Bible?* You might as well have been shooting a popgun at a stone wall. My mind was so strongly fortified in the doctrine of Westcott and Hort that I could not for one moment consider the King James Bible. Had I not studied Textual Criticism under the great Dr. A. T. Robertson? I thought that you were just one of those die-hard Fundamentalists who were striving to keep the Christian world under the bondage of traditionalism. Such men are interested only in pleasing the people by catering to their ignorance, prejudice and sentimentality! But just a few weeks ago I happened to read your two books, *Which Bible?* and *True or False?* For the first time a little new light shone in. I SAW THAT THERE IS ANOTHER SIDE TO THE ARGUMENT. DR. ROBERTSON HAD NOT GIVEN US ALL THE FACTS. As I perused your selections from Burgon and Hoskier, the idols of B and Aleph started to totter, and soon they fell off their pedestals. That was all I needed. I bought a copy of the *Textus Receptus* and am now using it. Thanks to you ... Sincerely yours, William T. Bruner, Th.M, Ph.D" (D.O. Fuller, *Four Recognized Greek Scholars Had No Use for the Book 'Which Bible?'* Until They Read It for Themselves, c. 1973). This practice of not giving students all of the facts pertaining to modern textual criticism and biasing them against even reading the writings of its critics is standard operating procedure for professors who defend the critical text.

4. A.T. Robertson was at the forefront of the ecumenical ventures of his day, helping to organize the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) in 1905.

The BWA's goal was to "allow opportunity for Baptists to grow in fellowship and learn much from each other" (Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 1987, p. 523). What this seemingly commendable goal ignored was that within Baptist circles many were already moving in the modernistic direction.

a. Almost two decades EARLIER Charles Spurgeon had sounded the following warning about the Baptist Union of Britain, which, with the Southern Baptist Convention, played a central role in the Baptist World Alliance from its inception: "As a matter of fact, believers in Christ's atonement are now in declared religious union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death, and a future restitution for the lost. Yes, we have before us the wretched spectacle of professedly orthodox Christians publicly avowing their union with those who deny the faith, and scarcely concealing their contempt for those who cannot be guilty of such gross disloyalty to Christ" (Spurgeon, "A Fragment upon the Down-Grade Controversy," *Sword and Trowel*, November 1887). In that same issue of his magazine, Spurgeon announced that he was pulling out of the Baptist Union because of the modernism and compromise, declaring, "We retire at once and distinctly from the Baptist Union." In March 1888, Spurgeon wrote, "So far as we can judge, there is no likelihood whatever that the Baptist Union will obtain a Scriptural basis." Yet A.T. Robertson, with his commendable knowledge of Greek, did not have this strength of spiritual discernment and conviction.

b. The apostasy that was rampant in Britain, including in the Baptist Union, by the time A.T. Robertson helped formed the Baptist World Alliance, was also described by the Bible League. By the time the League was formed in Britain in 1892, the apostasy which had begun as "a trickle" had "become a stream," shortly to expanded to a river, and then a veritable ocean of unbelief ("The Bible League: Its Origin and Its Aims," *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging*, Abingdon: The Bible League, 1984). Thus, it was in the midst of a river of unbelief, a river that encompassed many Baptists, that Robertson helped launch a unification plan that brought together both evangelicals and modernists.

c. When J. Frank Norris led the Temple Baptist Church of Detroit, Michigan, to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance in 1935, he cited its "modernistic dominated leadership" as a reason (*The F. Frank Norris I Have Known for 34 Years*, p. 311). Prior to that, fundamentalist leader A.C. Dixon had tried to have a resolution passed in the Baptist World Alliance affirming "five fundamental verities of the faith," including the verbal inspiration of Scripture and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. An apostate majority of the BWA representatives voted down this most simple of resolutions.

d. In this case study of A.T. Robertson, we see that Southern Baptists have refused to practice biblical separation for a very long time.

5. The study of unbelieving modern textual criticism had a negative influence on A.T. Robertson.

The Bible warns, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor. 15:33). "Lower criticism" (the "scientific" study of how the Bible has journeyed through the centuries; the study of biblical manuscripts) and "higher criticism" (the "scientific" study of how the Bible was written; the study of authorship, etc.) are not the distinctly different disciplines we have been led to believe. They are, in fact, two peas in one pod of end-time skepticism. One denies the Bible's supernatural inspiration; the other its supernatural preservation. Those who accept "higher criticism" have always seen "lower criticism" as a friend, and those who accept "lower criticism" are thrown into intimate fellowship with and led toward the acceptance of "higher criticism." Observe how this worked in the life of A.T. Robertson:

a. Robertson followed the skeptical fathers of textual criticism, such as Griesbach, Westcott, and Hort, in refusing to give the doctrine of divine preservation any place in his textual theories and in treating the Bible as another book by applying to it secular principles of textual criticism. This is most strange for a man who believed the Bible is a supernatural book, which Robertson most certainly did, but it is the sad fruit of evil communications.

b. In his article "Language of the New Testament," which he wrote for the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Robertson writes about the New Testament in a naturalistic fashion after the pattern of the rationalistic textual critics that he quotes in such profusion. He focuses exclusively upon the human side of the New Testament.

(1) He leaves room for the liberal theory that some unknown elders at Ephesus might have revised the Gospel of John. "A similar explanation is open concerning the grammatical lapses of the Apocalypse, since John is also called agrammatos, in Ac. 4:13, whereas the Gospel of John may have had the revision of the elders of Ephesus..."

(2) Robertson also says we might not know today what the original Gospel of Matthew was like. "It is possible, of course, that the supposed original was in Aramaic, or, if in Greek, of a more Hebraistic type." He does not explain why God would allow the original text, given by divine inspiration, to cease to exist or how this would fit into any type of believing position. These are serious capitulations to modernism and a blow to the biblical doctrines of inspiration and preservation, which Robertson held and defended in theory but which he did not apply consistently in practice.

c. Robertson accepted the Form Critic approach to the Gospels, believing that there was a "Q" document written in Aramaic that was used by Matthew and Luke (An Introduction to Textual Criticism, pp. 102, 103). The Bible nowhere teaches us to approach the Scripture in this type of humanistic fashion. The Gospels were given by divine inspiration; they are the product of the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus Christ taught us: "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (Jn. 14:26). Though written by men, the Gospels are supernatural productions from beginning to end; a divine four-fold portrait of Jesus Christ. It would have been impossible for the authors of the Gospels to have recalled the details of events with precision, to have known the innermost thoughts of men, to have known the secrets of the eternal Christ (i.e., John 1), or to have known what to write and what to leave out through any natural ability whatsoever. Thus, it is a waste of time to discuss the "human" aspect of the Gospels. Form Criticism is not science and it is not faith, and a Bible believer should never give it a moment's serious consideration. But a man who disobeys the Bible and associates with modernists by reading after them will be influenced by them. Not a few fundamentalists, especially would-be scholars, are following in these unwise footsteps even as we write.

d. Robertson even claimed that the original ending to Mark's Gospel might have been lost or that Mark might have died before he finished it (An Introduction to Textual Criticism, p. 216). This is another clear assault upon the doctrines of divine inspiration and preservation.

6. Even during Robertson's own lifetime, theological modernism was beginning to infiltrate Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and soon after his death the takeover was complete.

a. Historian David Beale says, "Edgar Y. Mullins is the transitional figure who represented a shift among many Baptists from an absolute view of verbal, plenary inspiration to more pragmatic and tolerant views. With him the great house began to shift from its historic rock." In 1917, Southern Seminary President Mullins published Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression, which was influenced by psychologist-philosopher William James and which "placed great emphasis upon experiential theology" and "was an inductive approach into the Bible on the basis of religious experience, rather than a deductive approach based upon the revealed precepts of God's Word" (David Beale, S.B.C.: House on the Sand, p. 27).

b. In 1922, Southern Seminary professor John Sampey published System Bible Study, which taught theistic evolution. "Dr. Sampey, along with Dr. Mullins, allowed the camel to get his nose into the denominational tent" (Beale, p. 29). A.T. Robertson would teach at Southern Seminary another 12 years after the publication of Sampey's book.

c. With the administration of its sixth president, Ellis A. Fuller (1942-50), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's drift toward apostasy took a much sharper turn. This era began only eight years after the death of A.T. Robertson.

(1) In 1943, a mere nine years after Robertson's death, noted modernist George Buttrick was invited to bring the E.Y. Mullins Lectures at Southern Seminary. In his book The Christian Fact and Modern Doubt, Buttrick wrote: "Literal infallibility of Scripture is a fortress

impossible to defend. ... In retrospect it seems incredible that the theory of literal inspiration could have ever been held" (pp. 162, 167). Literal inspiration is not a theory; it is a doctrine taught by the Lord Jesus Christ, who said "the Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn. 10:35). The doctrine of the full, supernatural inspiration of the Bible can't be held apart from faith, of course, and the same faith that was lacking in Buttrick's "higher criticism" was lacking in A.T. Robertson's "lower criticism."

(2) In 1947, modernists John Mackay (president of Princeton Seminary) and Nels Ferre lectured at Southern. Ferre denied practically every doctrine of the Christian faith, including the virgin birth, miracles, vicarious atonement, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his book *The Christian Understanding of God*, Ferre wrote, "We have no way of knowing, even, that Jesus was sinless" (p. 186). On page 191 of that book he blasphemously claimed that Mary was probably impregnated by a Roman soldier. In *The Sun and the Umbrella*, Ferre said, "Jesus never was nor became God" (p. 112) and "The use of the Bible as the final authority for Christian truth is idolatry" (p. 39) and "Hinduism is good and wise" (p. 117).

(3) Ellis Fuller was a consulting editor of the 12-volume *Interpreter's Bible*. In this project he joined hands with noted modernists such as George Buttrick, Henry Sloane Coffin of Union Theological Seminary, and Methodist Bishop Gerald Kennedy. Volume one announced, "The evidence is clear [that the Bible contains] inaccuracies, inconsistencies, interpolations, omissions, over-statements, and so forth" (p. 16). Most of Genesis, we are told by the *Interpreter's Bible*, and even many things in the Gospels, are largely legend.

d. Duke McCall followed Fuller (1956-1981) and took the seminary into even deeper apostasy. "Less than a year before McCall's retirement from the presidency, a SBTS trustee admitted that this man had led the institution into the mainstream of Liberalism and even into cooperation with the World Council of Churches" (Beale).

e. Modernists who taught at Southern Seminary in the 1940s and 1950s included Ellis Fuller, Eric Rust, and T.O. Hall. I am convinced that modern textual criticism laid the foundation for this wretched apostasy. Consider some quotes from the writings of these men:

"This does not mean we use phrases like inerrancy, for from the point of view of secular historical recording it is not inerrant. Furthermore, theologically it is not inerrant; otherwise it would not be history. ... It is of value, for example, to know that Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah were two distinct prophets belonging to different times and associated with very different movements of Hebrew history" (Eric Rust, "Theological Emphasis of the Last Three Decades," *Review and Expositor*, journal of Southern Seminary, Spring 1981).

"The Old Testament begins with two myths of creation both of which reflect elements from the pagan mythology of surrounding peoples" (Rust, *Nature and Man in Biblical Thought*, 1952, p. 20).

"The writers of holy Scripture had vital experiences with God. Having come to know Him by experience, they were led to record these experiences. This is not the Word of God. It is a record of it" (T.O. Hall, 1953, cited from David Beale, *S.B.C. House on the Sand*).

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